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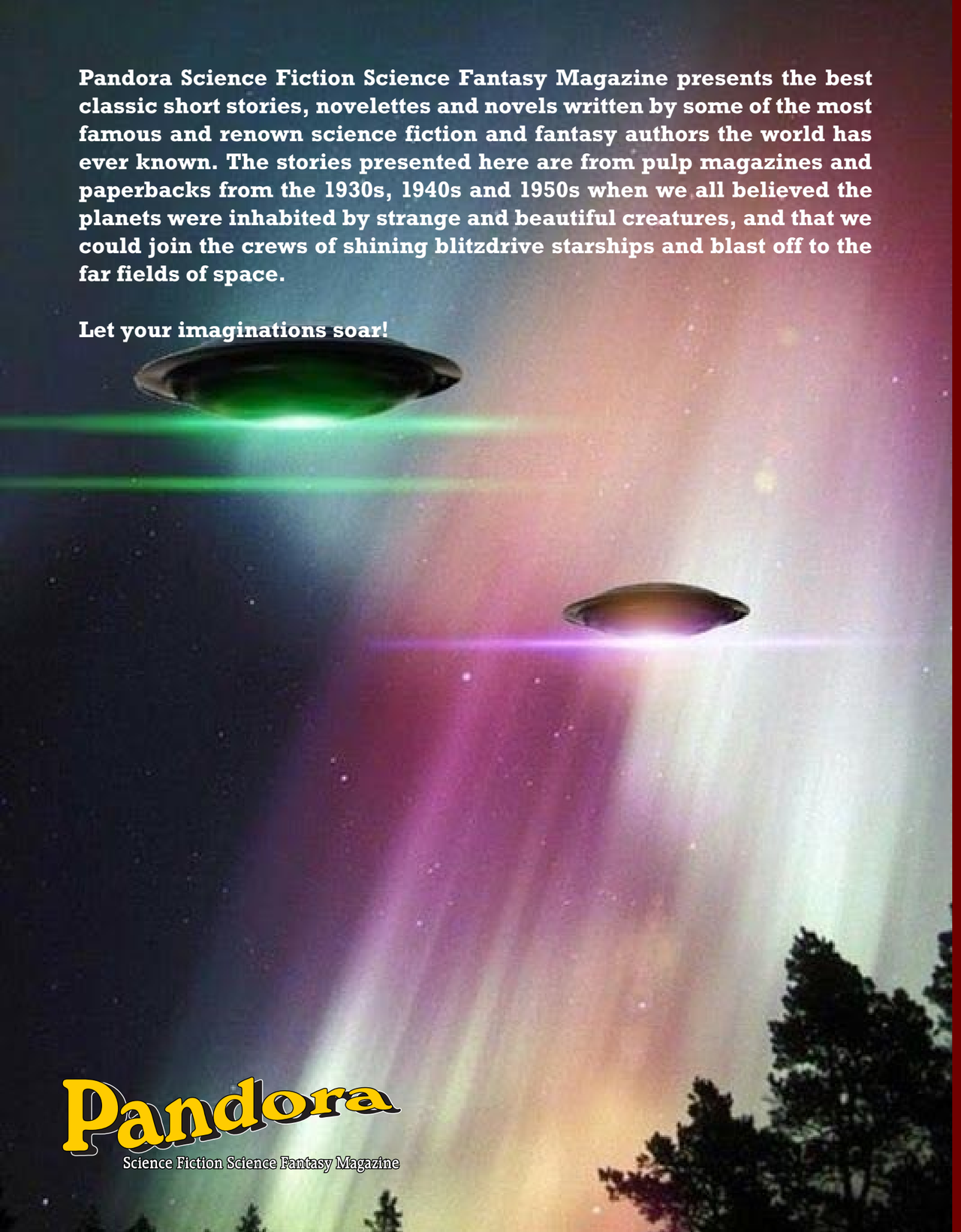

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14

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IN THIS ISSUE:
The Man Who Fell From A Clear Blue Sky©
The Windmills of Mars©

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
The Coming Of The Ice
The Day Time Stopped Moving

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Science Fiction Science Fantasy Magazine

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IN THIS ISSUE

The Man Who Fell From A Clear Blue Sky
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I have often wondered if "changelings", especially human/wolf changelings (hulfs) have not gotten a bad rap in the pages of contemporary literature. Certainly, there is ample anecdotal evidence to indicate that "werewolves" have existed and that they may have been responsible for gruesome crimes. But what if the hulfs were innocent of the crimes and have only been the scapegoats to cover up the crimes of other humans? This brief story examines such a possibility.

THE MAN WHO FELL FROM A CLEAR BLUE SKY©
THE STORY OF THE RAGGEDY MAN

How Dark The Blaze of Noon O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon, Irrevocably dark, total eclipse... Total eclipse! no sun, no moon! All dark amidst the blaze of noon!

At The End Of The Uiverse Lies The Beginning Of Life

Because it occurs in Time, there is no beginning to this adventure and, therefore, it will have no ending; at least no ending that the reader might recognize as an ending. It is a tale about people and the world they inhabit, about the world and the various people in it, about how people view and struggle with the world that often seems to thwart their every move, and how the world (and the cosmos for that matter) uses and consumes the creatures that dwell in it.

There is no great, earth-shattering moral to the story, unless the reader finds something his or her mind is listening to as they read, and connects those unspoken unthoughts to this tale. If there is an underlying thought, it will be to question whether or not humans and other creatures have any control over their existence while they are dwellers on this strange and often hostile world.

Since the story has no chronological beginning, it might as well begin today; this morning as I was strolling down the street on my way to the market to purchase food for my evening meal. I had twice seen an old man (or a man who appeared old, but who may have been middle-aged). He had the look and de-

meanor of a wretched homeless person and, yet, he walked with a stride and purpose that told me he was going somewhere important to him and that to get there was important. A most purposeful stride that was taking him to a meaningful destination, a dreadful mission. I was determined, out of curiosity, if nothing else, to follow him and find out what he was up to. I probably should have minded my own business.

The old man looked like an oily rag someone had thrown into a pond; he just kind of floated through the world all sloshy and raggedy and older than the scaly serpent itself. No one paid much attention to him; first he was there then he wasn't and few noticed either way. He was gutter rain and trash blowing across the street. Everyone knew he was there but no one cared. He was in the corner of your eye, the corner of your mind; he was sneeze or clear your throat or scratch an itch. He happened to the world automatically like he was invisible most of the time and probably that was the way he wanted it. The only reason the old man came to my attention at all was because I spotted him twice in the same day almost the same hour all wrinkly and brown dirty mail pouch tobacco barn siding skin, tattered clothes, dull brown eyes, dull brown greasy hair, streaks of gray, dull brown lips that looked like they hadn't cracked a smile in a thousand years walking in front of me the same way I was going with his gnarled dull brown hands permanently semi-clenched like dead chicken feet, sculling himself along the sidewalk with a stick he had found somewhere and I wondered where he lived and how he managed to survive in a world that cared little or nothing for homeless things.

I recalled someone mentioned that they had heard the old man had fallen from the sky and no one bothered him because the brassface police and the street thugs were scared to death of him saying he was immortal and invincible powerful filled with magic.

Everyone thought he was a magician from another world and who was to say otherwise?

It took some doing just to catch up with him and I thought maybe he even slowed down some so I could get up beside him without running and I said hi but he just kept rowing himself down the sidewalk like he either didn't see or hear me or did but didn't give a damn so I said hi again and he said go away or I'll hit you with this stick you nosy damned kid stop bothering me or I'll bust your head like a rotten punkin so I sidestepped a little but kept on walking with him and pretty soon he just stopped dead without warning and I took two steps before I could stop and he swung the stick like swoosh an inch from my face and I put up my arm and caught a mighty whack on the palm of my hand goddamn I hollered and he grinned like that was about the funniest thing he had seen in a long time.

Okay he says come along and I'll tell you the story of how I happened to fall

from the sky to land on this here miserable piece of real estate. How did you know I asked and he said that's what everyone who follows me wants to know so why would you be any different and I rubbed my hand with my other hand and walked with him into a dark gloomy alley between two old derelict buildings the city hadn't got around to tearing down and through a kind of doorway that seemed to appear from the darkness and into a black room with a couple of small boxes next to a bigger box like your old basic table and chairs and he lit a candle on the big box using a match from a folder that I couldn't even see until the light came up and I could see that the old man and me and the three boxes and the candle and the folder of matches were the only things in the room about sixty feet square, a room so large the candle light barely reached the graffiti walls, the peeling scarred gray dull concrete windowless walls ciphered with lifetimes of chalk and spray-paint, sad memories and forlorn wisdom.

The raggedy man seemed to waver in the flickering candle glow, staring at his hands, flexing and unflexing his fingers and marveling at the motion as if he had never really seen such wonders before that very moment.

We sat and he rested his chin in the palms of his upturned hands, staring into the flickering candlelight. He seemed to have died as soon as he sat for he did not move did not blink and I thought he did not even breathe for almost a minute.

The mirror people, he said of a sudden, cast me here when I least expected it to happen. I'd known for some weeks, couple of months really, that the people in the mirror were real, were alive, were watching me, every move I made, even when I wasn't in front of a mirror. They knew what I was doing, knew what I was thinking because they were doing and thinking the same thing. I began to fear sleeping, thinking the dopplegangers would come to get me in the darkness while I was dreaming of pretty girls and sweet cherry blossoms falling like pink snow.

Not certain what made me think of it the first time. I wasn't even in front of a mirror. I began to wonder if the image—the mirror image—extended beyond what could be seen in the glass. Look here, if you step slightly to one side of the mirror you can see the door to the bedroom. If you step the other way you can see the shower or the wardrobe. And a little more you can see down the hallway leading into the living room. You can't see the living room because it is around corners and behind walls but isn't the living room there all the same? Everything in your house or apartment is there, in the mirror. Even the world beyond your front door, the very cosmos itself, is in the mirror; you just have to be able to figure out how to see around the corners and through the walls.

You get so interested in the image in the mirror that it becomes you, and you forget who you were, who you are, who you could become. You become the person in the mirror.

I had everything I wanted. I envied no one, wanted no one else's life. Having survived the experience of living on Earth for a full forty years, I felt I was unique, unlike anyone else. I began to imagine that I had discovered some great universal secret, this new world in the mirror. It was the place where ghosts live, where spooks and haunts and creatures of the night reside until we think them into existence. I was reborn into a completely new reality and, having realized that, I had just begun to live.

The images in the mirror were from a parallel universe just waiting to be explored, just waiting there in the silvered glass, drawing me closer with every glance.

I began to obsess on this idea, wondering before I slept or soon after waking, if there was another being, a doppleganger, reclining on a bed identical to mine, only mirror-image, who was thinking about me lying in bed thinking about him. I began to fear that one day, when I least expected it, one of those beings in the mirror world would come and snatch me away.

I worried that I was mad and hoped that I was prepared for it but I knew I wasn't.

They didn't come for me at all. I went to them as easily as if I walked through a doorway into another room, just slipped right into the mirror one early Fall morning as if I'd been sucked up by a vacuum and landed in a backwards world. Everything seemed perfectly normal but in the back of my head I knew my world, what I thought of as the real world, was on the other side of the mirror. I wanted to go back but didn't know how. Going back was not as easy as crossing over.

I jumped from my world of 1851 to the first reflected world of 1951, a full one hundred years into their future. But the mirror world of 1951 was, I believe now, unlike the world that would have existed in 1951 where I originated. Perhaps it was or wasn't. I don't know anymore. I thought I had died and that I was in the world of death. I was certain God had forsaken me as punishment for my sins, which at that time were legion. I was afraid, scared stupid for a long time, but soon I accepted my life as the real life and began to suspect that the life I'd had on the other side of the mirror was an illusion.

As soon as I grabbed a hold of the mirror world, strange new things began to happen. I would wake up and be in a different world every morning, go to sleep in a different world every night. I almost couldn't keep up with it at first. But it was not long before I couldn't remember my life before I fell into the mirror.

Things happened slowly at the beginning like I was being prepared for my new world carefully, but soon came one adventure after another, a carousel whirling past me so quickly everything was a blur. I can't remember the first hundred years clearly but I do remember a couple of things that happened before I fell back through the mirror to land here. Now all I can think about is going back to

find the people I knew there, in the last world into which I had fallen, the people I loved, the people I long for.

"You said 'the first hundred years,' " said I. "Were you there that long?"

"Twice as long, perhaps thrice as long. It is not in me to remember so many years, so many adventures. Sometimes I think I am dreaming it all, even now here with you. But I was going to tell you about the people I cared for, wasn't I?"

"Yes, tell me," I said, and he pursed his dull gray lips and nodded sagely. Presently he spoke and when he did his voice was thin and dark and ancient.

Gold and frankincense and myrrh. The earth exploded beneath a new star. I walked under the vast electric midnight sky. Wise men arrived at last but they did not stop to ask for directions; they knew where they were going. The oak tree, naked in the shadow, was not interested in cherry blossoms or dancing cranes in far away Japan. An imprisoned monk sipped warm tea before a dusty window while he peered at the four strangers, barely visible on the road below. It was quiet except for the faint white voices of geese winging southward in the high and lonely sky.

The sea darkened; the tall cliffs, newly washed by crashing high tide, stood as mute guardians against the invincible intruding waves.

How cold it was.

The gray pink fog, never far behind, accompanied the winter wind, pushed, stirred up the loose, torn off bits of seagrass, ready or not, and dragged them into the relentless surf, carried them to where, scattered all about, remained the rumpled souvenirs of heaven's flame, all one pile.

Unarmed but for faith I walked across the dying embers of the universe, holy golden funeral pyre, low and crackling, where the bleating wind swirled the ashes as they rose to the nameless hill in the mist.

Rain, falling like hard, rusted nails, a sudden late autumn shower. I was newly baptized. I reached out and touched the rook's impulsive call, a massive melody agonizing downward from the greening shade. The planets hesitated. Martyrs with ashen faces looked up briefly from the temple, sputtering madness, incredulous, then withdrew into their lairs, heads bowed beneath uncombed hair.

All was still once more.

A green frog, its form freshly painted by the clinging mist, sprang into an old pool, plopping into the sound of water. My footsteps alarmed the rooks and they flew madly just above the withered reeds, protesting my approach. Soon will come the first soft snow, enough to bend the leaves of the fragile jonquil and in the frog's cry was a portent of the winter death to come.

Still shivering, I longed for cherry blossoms and butterflies, for brightly colored Maples and sun-filled skies. Last days of autumn, first days of winter. No

one traveled the road now but I, steeped in thoughts and loneliness as dawn ascended. Far down the stream I could see the rough wooden bridge that joined the path leading to the stone house on the cliff. The ammonia-colored moon was hidden now and then by angry dark clouds; the stars were gone. Around the harvest pool more frogs leaped away as I longed for the warmth of home. I thought I would not like to die here in this place behind the mirror, in this dream, in this gloom where there was no joy, no sky, no moon, no stars, no flowers.

How cold it was, how cold. No familiar sky, no familiar earth, but still the snow will fall.

In the pale light I stared into the stream and saw my father's face. The clouds parted for a moment and I could see the Milky Way Galaxy at the bottom of the dark water. When I looked up it was already gone. I was naked in the darkness. I stirred the water with my hand, remembering the vision of the stars but only a slight muddiness appeared.

The imprisoned monk, having finished his warm tea, was playing his flute all out of tune. The horizon was glowing lighter in the east. Soon the sun would rise, still lost to my sight above the black clouds. In the half light I longed for love and the cold wind turned to rain again, smudging the clouds that snaked through the stream. The bridge was not far but I leaped across the narrow stream and struggled up the far bank in the mud, too eager for the shelter and warmth of the hearth.

A lightning flash in the faraway sky. Between the forest trees I saw the shape of a creature watching as I approached. When the lightning flashed again, it was gone. It saw all it needed to see.

In that morning's mad world, visions of the hulf.

I was cold and now I was smeared with mud to my knees. I mounted the trail to the stone house above on the windswept cliff. The footpath was slick and the going was slow.

Dreams in my head like wet heavy rain, like soot on a broken window, like a soft and terrible machine, like a skulking young hulf and when she growled I could hear under the purling little girl voice the dark, lean, terrible animal living in the heat of her throat.

This hulf had been stalking me for at least an hour, from the moment I left the safety of the village where she wished not to show herself, and I could tell from the sound of her panting it was a female. I never saw her clearly, but I knew she was there in the underbrush trying to keep pace with me and I wondered if she was hungry, if she would pounce upon me and kill me.

But it had been an hour and still she had only followed and I pondered to what purpose.

I stopped and peered into the dense brush then upward at the house above

me on the headland, longing all the more for its safety and comfort.

"Hulf," said I with a gentle voice, "Why do you not come out to the path where the ground is firmer, where we may walk together to the house yonder?"

Silence in the bush, then a low purling, then a stirring and parting of the green, and she crept into view first on all fours—I started at the sight of her— then she stood with amazing agility, smiling a little smile, her eyes keen upon me, her hands curled as if to attack but her back straight and strong. When she spoke her voice was remarkably masculine and deep, a counterpoint to the siren female whisper above it as if she spoke with two voices at once.

"I am not good at tracking," she intoned through her white wolf teeth and dark red hunger, wondering aloud if we humans had to sleep with the fear of waking someday to find we, too, were changing into the hulf, part human and part wolf, sometimes more of one than the other and I just smiled back at her with deliberate silence, eyes narrowed and piercing, until she turned away to gaze with feral curiosity at the stone house above us on the rocky promontory.

"And are you going there?" she asked presently.

"I am."

"May I go with you?"

"If you wish it." And I wondered if she had children and if they, too, were hulfs living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder.

"My forerunners were human like you," she said. "It was only after the disease accident that we became the hulf living on the swiftness of our limbs. I was only thirteen years alive when I began to change. Now I am twenty years alive and I have had no children." She thrust out her ample bare human breasts and laughed gaily, almost a puppylike yelp. "Not yet."

"Did you think perhaps to kill me and have me for breakfast back there?" I asked.

"Briefly," said she, "but I suppose I am too much human and too little wolf to do it." And nothing else.

And so we walked to the house together without further conversation.

I felt, for a moment, that she wanted to reach out and take my hand, to walk swinging it gaily back and forth like a child at a circus with her father. But, perhaps, it was I who wanted to hold the hulf's hand so that both she and I would feel more at ease.

I did and she did not draw away.

When we reached the house I began to search for the key in my kit while she gazed about at the mist-covered trees and brush, the spider webs bejeweled

with glistening droplets of crystal rain, and she soon spied an enormous rook perched upon a barren limb, preening and combing its feathers fastidiously.

Here the hulf mustered up some urge to commune with nature. Perhaps she wished to see some design among the fallen leaves and receive some backtalk from the mute sky or the frantic rook, open to any gesture on the part of nature to grant a brief respite from fear of what she had become. The hope of such a moment of transcendent beauty and communion seemed worth the wait for that which she interpreted as that rare, random granting of a miracle.

The rook, arranging and rearranging its feathers, seemed like a fastidious spinster in comparison with the strange form of the sad hulf. It was an object set out on the landscape for no particular purpose, because her real desire was some backtalk from the recalcitrant human. Neither rook nor sky nor human spoke, but the hulf herself was very wordy, full of parenthetical phrases, uttered half whispers, concerned not with the actual landscape but with her own thoughts. She finally reattached these thoughts to the landscape by declaring that the rook might be a tasty morsel, a repast enjoyed in the company of bejewelled columbines.

She was aglow, was the hulf, in the notion that she might have been the first of her pack to travel this high mountain trail, delighted by a rook on a bare branch autumn morning, and last summer's berry canes and vines binding the sagging fence, and the stone house of a human who had actually taken her hand and urged her upward to the lonely headland.

I left most of my wet and muddy garments on the screened porch, then fetched towels. The she hulf had no idea what to do with a towel, so I showed her by first drying her and then myself. She allowed me to touch her without the least bit of shame.

Her hair was long and unkempt although it seemed not to be dirty. Her upper torso was as human as any human girl I had ever seen but her lower torso was covered with a soft, light colored downy fur. Except that her face appeared to protrude a bit more than normal at the jaw, she was quite a striking looking girl. The most unusual features were her legs and feet. The heel was high, exactly like a canine's and she walked on toes which terminated in canine claws. She had slightly pronounced canine teeth

A month earlier creatures such as that she hulf filled me with disgust and revulsion; now I watched her with admiration and, perhaps, something more; adoration, or if not adoration, then empathy.

I struck a fire on the hearth which at first filled her with temerity. I sat before the flames to show that the fire would only harm her if she fell into it or got too near. She crept toward it, cautious and inquisitive, soon sat with her legs beneath her haunches and gazed at the hypnotic curling.

In the light I could see that she was beautiful, almost diaphanous, both in

form and in features. Her dark wolf eyes turned toward me and caught me stealing her beauty. She smiled softly and I blushed.

"Have you a name?" I asked.

"Name?"

"Yes, a name. What do the others call you?"

"They call me to them by saying 'hulf'."

"And the others," I asked, "are they also addressed as 'hulf'?"

She nodded to affirm it.

I could not refer to her as 'hulf'; it was not in me to do it. "May I call you by a human name?"

"Yes," said she absently, still mesmerized by the dancing fire.

"I'll call you Cybele, then. Is that alright?"

"See-bee-lee," she repeated and nodded her head slightly.

"My human name is Guillaume," I said. "Close friends call me Gill."

"Gill." She nodded again as she repeated the name and her old stones and mossy voice made it sound like thunder echoing from faraway mountains.

Hulf and human, Cybele and Gill, we took breakfast of hot chocolate and honeyed biscuits under one roof together, moon in a field of clover and among all the moon gazers at the ancient temple grounds below, there was not one nearly so beautiful as the hulf. I was enchanted and she was the enchantress.

Later I dozed in my chair before the hearth, wrapped in a soft comforter, and she lay upon a cushion at my feet, refusing my invitation to sit in the facing chair, saying the position of sitting as a human was too difficult for her, too uncomfortable, too foreign. By mid morning, we slept soundly and the fire burned down to cold ash.

When I awoke, she was gone, the door closed securely behind her and I felt strangely and sadly alone, longing for her to return, cold and empty inside.

She had taken the towel and I wondered why.

The wise men, ever erudite and pedantic, had told us that we might all change eventually into the hulf and laws were passed after that forbidding anyone to kill them. Generally speaking, the hulfs presented no danger to those of us who had not changed. Even so, most people shunned them and tried to drive them away. As long as there was adequate food, the hulfs stayed to themselves, formed their own communities as packs and were civil to each other and to humans.

But when food was not plentiful, or when the populations of hulfs outgrew the food supply (they were prolific breeders), there would in some towns occur an occasional kill and human bones would be found in the ditches and fields. Then the humans would put their guns by their doors and sit by the fires all night, alert for sounds of skulking creatures outside in the darkness, some of the men looking

for any excuse to reduce the populations of the changelings, never thinking that the victims might have been killed by other humans.

I dreamed of a man of power standing at a podium with his hand raised to heaven, invoking the wisdom of God. The man of power said God told him the hulfs were evil and should all be killed. Next morning he was found torn to shreds on his living room floor.

All in my dream.

A week later one of the pundits who advocated the deaths of the hulfs was found torn to shreds on his living room floor. I think it was a coincidence that it happened the way I dreamed it.

Winter drew closer with each passing hour and I grew keen to close the house and go to my apartment in the village below. I put it off day after day hoping the she-hulf would return. I did not want her to find the house locked and empty.

Strange that I should have been so concerned for her. The thought of her living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder filled every hour of every day of my life.

A linnet sang, and through a thicket of barren larches the late moon shone. That cool morning was swept away into the sea. All along the road to the village not a single soul, only the autumn dawn came, seen but not heard; the branches of the forlorn trees poured rainwater into puddles when they leaned, then, with the solitaire for a soul, they slept peacefully, awaiting the first snows already lurking above the peaks to the north.

Dark autumn old age settled down on me like heavy clouds or dying birds and dead morning glory vines secured the gate in the old fence; the hand of death strangling the life from the world. Crossing half the sky, as I stared at the raging gray ocean below, massive clouds promised snow and, later, a sudden winter shower sent the noisy rooks diving into the shelter of the eaves.

Day and night. Night and day. Even those long and dreary days and nights were not long enough to empty my mind of the she hulf Cybele. No words can express how sad I was, propped unceremoniously against the great window frame staring dumbly at the darkening seasons outside.

I wished she were there to listen to my words. The world is wearisome when there is no one to share it. I stalked from room to room through that house of dreadful night.

Raindrops spiraled down from unknown universes, carrying their precious cargoes of microscopic life. The seas darkened and the wild geese had all gone to their breeding grounds far to the south. I wished I had gone with them. From every direction winter approached. The house had become a trap; I yearned to close it and go to the village.

But I determined to wait one more day for Cybele.

When I awoke the next morning (late, for I slept fitfully), there was a light covering of fresh snow upon the ground. Thin, it would melt by noon. A foot from the bottom step of the porch was a yellow patch where something had pissed in the snow. I began to look from window to window, front and back, side to side, for signs of Cybele, hoping she had returned, hoping she was waiting, worrying that she would be cold and wet. At first nothing, then, near the shed behind the house I saw her crouching to examine something in the tall, brown grass. When she stood, she was holding a tiny rabbit. She pulled the towel from her shoulders and wrapped the bunny in it and held it close to her breasts.

I opened the back door and she turned toward me and came in, just like that, without a word, and went in to sit before the fire newly built upon the hearth.

"Something for this tiny?" she asked, and I brought some greens from the refrigerator, watched amazed as she caressed it and fed it until it slept in the warm towel.

I wondered aloud, unfortunately, if she was saving it for a meal and she glared at me with accusing eyes. "That is offensive. This is an orphan who has survived the first snow of winter here on this high place. To think that I would kill it is a knife in my heart. Never ask such things of me again."

I apologized sincerely and she turned away with a nod to begin caressing once more the orphaned survivor of the first snow of winter. I felt terrible to have misjudged her so.

"When you were here before," I began to ask.

"Yes?"

"Why did you take the towel?"

"I needed it for this tiny," she answered and the occult wisdom of the response slammed into my brain like a hammer. Had she really foreseen the discovery of the cold little orphan? I suspected she had.

"Can you imagine it?" he asked me, still staring into the candle flame.

"I can. But did you close the house and go to the village as you had planned?"

"No. After Cybele returned I never even thought of it again. We spent the first months of winter there, a mild winter as it turned out, and I was often able to go into the village for provisions. I bought girl clothes for her, warm things because it seemed to me she was often uncomfortable with the cold. She was rarely without a towel for a shawl, although it may have been a security blanket rather than a hedge against the cold. It pleased her to receive the gifts and I must admit it pleased me to give them."

"Did you fall in love with her?" I asked. "Oh, yes, of course, from the very beginning, despite knowing it was an impossible thing for both of us." "Did

you...ah...sleep with her?" I asked as delicately as possible. He smiled wryly and looked away into the darkness at the edge of the light. "Always that imprudent question. The answer is no, I did not; something I often thought of and more often regretted having not done. She was an innocent child and I was two hundred years old. I thought to protect her and she thought of me as her guardian. To kiss her, to caress her would have been the same as to destroy her innocence for no purpose. You see that it was... not possible. But you are wondering why I am here and she is not. A long story and a sad one."

"Why do you say you were two hundred years old?" I asked.

"Quite simply because I was at least that old. I am even older now that I am here. When I fell into the mirror, or to be more precise, when my image and I exchanged places in the mirror, the year was 1851. I landed in an alternate world of the hulfs where it was, by my time reckoning, 1951, and now I am here where, if I reckon aright, it is the year 2054. I have been here for two years and each day of that I have been trying to figure out how I can return to the world of the hulfs. I am beginning to fear that it is not possible."

"You do not look like a two hundred years old man," said I, appraising him with a sideways glance and thinking he might be more than a little bit mad.

"I have not aged a day since I fell into this strange world. I am still forty years old although I have lived nearly two hundred and fifty years."

"Is that, do you think, a paradox of the parallel universe?

"I imagine, although I have not really given it much thought. But, probably, it is."

"But you are safe here and secure. No one has any thought to harm you. Why do you feel you must return?" I asked.

He was quite for a time, rocking gently back and forth on the creaky wooden box chair.

"Because I had promised to lead them to safety, to a sanctuary, where they could live without fear of the humans but I was unable to complete the journey. We began our dangerous journey without much planning in the last days of winter, escaping from men who would murder us.

"It was terrible. We were constantly hungry and thirsty. I was always cold and wet and I feared that if the humans did not find and kill me, I would perish from disease or exposure to the elements.

"Sometimes we walked; sometimes we ran, always hiding during the day and making our way through unfamiliar lands at night. We had fled for hundreds of miles in those months of late winter and early spring and I began to think that we might reach our destination safely within just a few more days.

"And, then, one morning, I awoke to find myself here in this abandoned

building, with not a clue as to what might have happened to the others. I believe, or I want to believe, that my mirror self continued with them and completed that mad journey to freedom.

"But I must know the truth. If I do not return, I fear they may all perish. Time may not be the same for them as it is for me. A hundred years or a thousand may have passed for them. They may have already reached their haven safely, or they may have perished, but I must find out.

"It is I who is now living in the dystopian world of terror and blackness upon the land, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder.

"My dear God, I am at an age now and at a time where life stops giving and begins to take. What a mockery our bodies make of us when they are finished with us. It would be better if we simply evaporated when we grow too old and weary to go on living; a puff of smoke drifting skyward and that would be the end of us."

It was cold enough to make the devil swear on the evening the others came, the other hulfs, two dozen to be sure, slipping into the yard under cover of darkness and asking entrance to the house. I struggled to understand the meaning of their visit until Cybele explained that a vaccine had been formulated that would protect humans against the disease that had affected the hulfs. The hulfs, living in their dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder, could not be protected; they would continue to change until they perished from the disease or were killed by humans.

And I came to understand that evening the true reason Cybele had taken the towel. It bore my scent and that scent had led the pack around the village, through the forest and up the steep incline to my doorstep, the beginning of their hazardous and fearful escape from certain death.

The world I had thought secure now changed into something new and foreboding. The hulfs, all of the pack to which Cybele belonged, were asking that I lead them away to a place of safety in the South; a place they were told about by others who had journeyed there and returned to spread the word that a haven existed for any hulf brave enough to chance it. They could no longer travel safely in the world of humans now that a preventive had been found. Hulfs were hunted and killed without mercy. They had become expendable, a sacrifice to science. Six from their pack had already been slain.

I was filled with dread for the hulfs, but most especially for Cybele and the pups, and, at the end, I agreed to lead them to the unknown sanctuary in the South. I had no idea where to begin. In wiser days, when I was younger and stronger, I might have made a plan for salvation before the night was over but that evening I

was stymied and loathe to dice with death. And, oh, I could see in their eyes, their shining eyes, their hopeful eyes, the growing fear that I might abandon them to the mad guns cursing in the village below, and some began to decry their hope in knowing tones.

Picture it; we fools, I and they, now all with the dying and the dead, standing mute around the fading hearth and wondering, all of us, we miserable fools, they and I, how we might tend toward this task. Darkness never seemed so dark; dread never seemed quite so dreadful as on that smothering night.

Now here I am, sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire. Some days when you wake up, you think you are the same person who went to sleep in your bed the night before.

Believe me, you aren't.

In wiser days, in days before I first fell into the mirror (oh, how I wish I knew how it happened,) I had no thoughts of heroic adventures. I worked and enjoyed my life as most ninteenth century forty-yearold men did, giving little or no thoughts to the lives and wants of others, even of those I thought I loved. Live and let live, you see.

Now, here in this place where I am imprisoned, I can think of little else save Cybele and the others and trying to find a way to get back to them. Yes, I know the mirror me must have taken them to their sanctuary, but I dearly want to know if they made it or not.

"Perhaps," said I, "you don't want to know. What if you learn they didn't safely reach their destination? What if you find they and you— the mirror you—perished before you reached the sanctuary?"

"Perished? How perished?"

"Accident or at the hands of others," I said.

"The humans, you mean?" the raggedy man asked.

"Or perhaps other hulfs who saw you as a threat...or see you as a threat, as the case may be or may have been."

"I think they would not ever have done that, and yet..." he let the thought slip away as his mind drifted back to that time moments ago or hundreds of ages past when he had promised to lead the hulfs to safety in the south of whatever world he had found himself in.

"No," he said at last, "If my double had been killed or even injured there, I could not have come here, or I would have come here injured, and I did not".

"Are you certain that's how it works?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

His piercing grey eyes bored into me. "For me, at least, up to this point."

He stood slowly and languidly, stretching his lean frame wearily. "You should go now," he said at length. "I want to continue my experiments with the transference, to see if I can discover what beam or current existed on the occasions that I fell into these alternate worlds."

"But have you a mirror?" I asked.

"Pieces that I have salvaged from the trash bins. They are not adequate, I think, since I have been unable to effect a transfer. Perhaps you might fetch one for me and bring it tomorrow."

"Several, perhaps. Large or small?"

"Small," he said. "About this size." He made a circle with his arms, fingertips touching.

"Then I shall bring two when I take my lunch hour."

"Oh, of course," he said quietly. "I forget people here must work for...things."

He promised to continue with his story the following day and, after getting a list of things he could use—not the least of which was a boxful of food and toiletries, bottles of drinking water and clean clothes—I bid him farewell.

I turned and looked back at him as I left the building and saw that he was again sitting on the hard wooden box with his mouth working chants and silent, unspoken dreams that seemed to fall away from him like smoke and summer rain. He made little gestures with his thin, gnarled fingers, pointing and waving, brushing his thoughts away and inventing others from the still, dark air.

I did not go to work the following day. I called in for a vacation day and went directly to a hardware store to purchase the two mirrors, then, with the boxes of supplies and the mirrors, I drove to the abandoned building where I expected to find the traveler waiting for me. He was not there. I lighted the candle to dispel the darkness and sat to wait for him. It was nearly ten o'clock before he rowed himself through the open doorway holding in his right hand a small book.

"Library," he said, by way of explaining where he had been. "I have no library card, so I had to steal it." He held the book toward me so I could read the title. Currents From The Void, was imprinted on the spine. His eyes gleamed with some sort of ethereal light, almost glowing with electric fire, and for a moment I was frightened that I was in the presence of a demon. I started backward but he pointed to some debris beyond the ring of light; wooden stands that I had not seen. He placed the book upon the box he used as a table.

"You'll return it for me, won't you?" he asked.

"What?"

"The book. You'll return it?"

"Oh, of course."

He began arranging the wooden stands near the table. "If you want to see

ghosts," he said, "just look into the mirror. Or, better still, have the two mirrors look at each other." As he spoke, he went busily about placing the two mirrors in a way that they directly faced one another, each reflection creating an infinite passageway into and out of the other.

"According to the book, by placing these two mirrors facing one another, the light energy reflected back and forth between them might create a vortex, an energy beam or current, that might create a transfer of my mirror double from his world to this one."

"And you to his," I said.

"Precisely, exactly, yes."

Light might be coaxed out of empty space, he explained, when in the presence of reflective surfaces. It was, he said, a process known as the "Casimir Effect" where two metallic plates or mirrors placed in close proximity to one another can result in an attraction between the two, despite there being no charge running into the plates to create an electromagnetic force. The reflecting coatings of mirrors is silver, an excellent conductor of electricity.

"The attraction seems to come from the fact that virtual photons— that is, particles of light energy that only exist for a limited time and space—exist in greater numbers outside the two plates, rather than between them. The resulting force, though miniscule, is still strong enough to be measured." He wagged a finger at the book. "I read it there."

He motioned me to the table and sat, then began sorting through the food and clothes I had brought. He constructed a large sandwich and ate parts of it while he examined the clothing and toiletries, humming and nodding, nodding and humming, until he had selected a shirt and trousers, shoes and stockings that suited him.

"These will do nicely. Thank you."

I nodded and managed a smile. "Sturdy togs for traveling," said I. "In case you are thinking of traveling, I mean."

"Yes. Now or tomorrow or next week, if I can transfer."

"And if you cannot?

"I will keep trying."

He ate slowly, deliberately, as he explained his arrangement of the mirrors. In all the years of thinking of mirrors, it had never occurred to him, he said, to place two of them facing each other, precisely aligned so that one reflected the other and nothing else, either to the sides or to the top or bottom. Mirrors so placed should be able to collect and store virtual photons, if even for a fraction of a second, and be reflected as light, vibrating back and forth, reflected back and forth endlessly, infinitely, billions of times per second, creating a magnetic field, a beam,

a current exactly like a river, a physical bond between the mirrors upon which one might travel to the far fields of space and time.

"And, according to this fellow in the book, the virtual photons do not merely create light where none exists; ethereal light, it also retains the images of everything that passed before it and all that passed in one's life. Images, sound, sensations and actual memories. That is why I experienced so many adventures when I exchanged worlds the first time. I was living and reliving the lives of every mirror double with whom I was reacting. When I at last slipped into that one life of the gent who lived in the stone house upon the headland, all the others faded away."

"So you think that you can step into this virtual energy and be whisked away back to the world of the hulfs?" I asked. "What makes you think you can go back to the world you left? This is like a time machine of some sort. Aren't you afraid you will appear on another world in the middle of a war, or in the middle of a plague, or some other mass extinction?"

He shook his head with dark, brooding eyes. Clearly he was not afraid of any of those possibilities. Or he simply refused to acknowledge them. He was focused upon returning to Cybele; intent upon saving her from the guns of the madmen who wanted only to kill the hulfs.

"The mirrors create light and memories from empty space where none actually exists," he cried, hands above his head, sweeping the air as if to clear it of debris and call down blazing shards of fire and brimstone. "If I step into the current, the dopplegangers will also step into the current of their mirrors at the same time because we are always doing exactly the same things with the mirrors, and we should transfer; I there and he, here. Or I to some other world and he to another, rather than I to his and he to mine. That is the chance one takes when posing before the mirror. The world to which I transfer will be like this one in nearly all respects. See, I had never thought of using two mirrors before. I always tried to use a single mirror. But in my home in the year 1851 there were two mirrors in the room, facing each other. And in the home upon the headland, there was but a single mirror in the great room. In none of the rooms were there two mirrors facing each other. It did not occur to me that the mirrors would actually produce the current of virtual energy that could project me into another existence, a parallel universe, a mirror cosmos."

"How, then, did you transfer here?" I asked.

He finished eating the sandwich and wiped his mouth upon the sleeve of his ragged coat. His eyes grew empty and he drew down a somber face. "Ah," he said at last, "that is the story, isn't it? That is the error. That is the flaw I could not see."

The raggedy man fell into a deep silence, still and hardly breathing. "What if I fail?" he said at last. "What if I cannot transfer? Perhaps my plan for the mirrors is a fantasy and all that happened before was simply some kind of mad coinci-

dence. What if I cannot return to lead them to safety?" He sagged, with his neck drawn down into his shoulders, and he shook his head forlornly.

"Then one day, when this world had ended, she will join you. Cybele, I mean. You will be together somewhere, somewhen," I said and touched his arm reassuringly.

He drew away and stared at me incredulously. "Do you really imagine the cosmos is so tender, so gracious, so kind? How came I here before I completed my task if that is so?"

I told him I didn't know the answer to that but that I felt certain if his love for the she-hulf was strong enough, they might meet again in another life.

"Strangely enough," he said with narrowed eyes, "I have some memories of such things, although I cannot be certain they are not memories of dreams or nightmares or hallucinations. I remember living briefly and dying on the planet Mars." He looked up quickly, fixing me with his fierce, mad gaze, assured himself I did not think him possessed, and looked away into the shadows at the edges of the room. "Perhaps it is a sort of madness brought about by the mirror world in which I dwelled for some many years. And it is all of them who share my concern equally."

"What?"

"I want to return to save all the hulfs; not just Cybele, although she does concern me most, I confess."

I cleared my throat of the tight dryness I felt there. "Perhaps, when their world has ended, they will appear here to be with you," I said.

"Their world has already ended. It is no longer their world. They were driven out, brutalized, and to appear here would be the worst of all situations! Can you imagine what would happen to them in this world if they suddenly appeared as hulfs, as I left them? They would be murdered just as quickly here as there and perhaps even more brutally. Are they dead now? Were they ever alive? Am I alive or dead? I don't even know anymore. But I shall surely die if I cannot return to learn if they were saved. I can feel myself growing older and closer to the fate that awaits all humans since I fell to this place."

"You can try," I said softly. "Only try."

"Yes." He nodded gravely. "Only try."

"Perhaps, if you are successful with the mirrors, you will find them again," I said as I watched him arrange and rearrange the mirrors. "Perhaps you will find Cybele again."

"One must be lost in order to be found. They are not lost; it is I who has gone missing." He stared at the grafitti-covered walls with empty eyes. "Why do you test me?" he growled. "Have I not been tested enough these last two-hundred years?"

He was clearly challenging whatever god he thought might be listening at that moment, shamelessly, as if he had no shame at all.

"Oh, dear Cybele! Jack! Pups! Apollo! Naomi! Why, Shiatan, do you test me so?" He breathed a long, quivering sigh and turned back to me. "I must complete my arrangements here to learn if I can create the vortex or energy field that will carry me on to the next world, or back to that world which I so long to see again."

We do not know what we do not know. And we fools; all of us, could not know what awaited us when we planned so carefully our perilous escape. Had I known the dangers, the sadness, the treachery we would encounter, I might have told the hulfs that we could not go. But, we planned through the winter, often huddling around the blazing fire late into the evenings, that we should begin soon after the first promising warm days of spring.

We heard no fearful reports from the village of more killings and we sank into a kind of trusting denial, thinking that everything would be alright, believing that the villagers had decided to try to live with the hulfs; even if in an uneasy peaceful coexistence. These were naive, foolish dreams. The reason we heard no gunshots or further reports of death was because nearly all the hulfs had been killed by mid-winter, and only a few had managed to flee to the south, to safety, or the promise of it.

But we did not know these things for we remained secluded in the stone house on the headland, rarely venturing out for fear of being seen, and only I, at that, and only to go into the village for provisions that we needed to survive. The plan had been to always keep a small store of supplies to take with us, food and water we could not buy or find as we moved southward, and to live off the land as much as possible.

It was easy to plan but, as we were to discover, nearly impossible to accomplish. In late winter and early Spring, there is little growing from the cold earth to sustain man or beast. Seeds and berries and herbs still lay dormant beneath patches of lingering snow. It is a wonder any of us managed to survive at all.

Cybele came to me early one late winter morning, wrapped in the blanket she had become accustomed to carrying with her, still sleepy-eyed from her warm pallet in the cellar.

"We have been talking and thinking," she said.

"Yes?"

"Some are thinking of leaving in a few days even if you choose not to lead us."

I was astonished. "But, why?" I asked.

"They... some of them... are afraid. They say they can smell death in the village. They say they cannot hear the voices of the other hulfs.

They are afraid." "And you?" "Yes," she responded softly. "I, too, am afraid. Not of staying until warmer days, but of their fear and what it might drive them to do. They do not trust the humans; some are beginning wonder if even you might betray them. I worry that some harm may come to you."

Do you care for me that much? I wondered, and saw in her eyes that she did. "Did they send you to speak with me?" I asked. "I told them I would do it because I trust you. I know you will not deceive us."

I turned away from her and held my hands toward the fire, rubbing warmth into my fingers and arms. At length I faced her. "We shall leave in two days. Tell them that. No, I shall tell them myself after all are awakened and have eaten."

And, so, for two days we packed our provisions—scant few that we had—wrapped our bedding and selected clothing so that all would appear at a distance to be humans, placed as much as we could into two small carts and enjoyed, on that last afternoon in the stone house, a substantial meal.

After sunset at middle March, the hulfs all dressed as humans dress and we ventured into the night. I did not even bother to lock the house, knowing even then that I should never return. It was still quite cold.

There was no moon that night.

One of the problems with being the last of your kind is that, if things do not work out, if your plans for the future fail and your dreams go awry, then you and your blood line shall soon cease to exist. Nothing will remain of you to remind future generations that you were even here, except, perhaps, some myths and legends whispered around an evening hearth. It was likely that the two dozen hulfs who had stayed with me through the winter and a few dozen more from the village were the only ones who had managed to escape the guns and axes of the humans. How many others had already fled to the sanctuary in the south and found safety we could only guess.

I had done all I could to encourage the hulfs, to convince them we could reach the unknown sanctuary had we but the courage, stamina and perseverance to accomplish it. Secretly, I hoped my promises would not be revealed to be the hollow mutterings of a fool.

The arrow of time moves forward only. Things done can never be undone but, perhaps, they can be repeated or duplicated or reenacted differently, or dreamed again on a new night with less terrifying conclusions. Perhaps. Perhaps.

Sometimes we walked; sometimes we ran, always hiding during the day and making our way through unfamiliar lands at night. It was dreadful. We were constantly hungry and thirsty. I was always cold and wet and I feared that if the humans did not find and kill me, I would perish from disease or exposure to the elements. In moments of fevered madness I even imagined that the hulfs would kill me as I slept and eat me.

We had fled for hundreds of miles in those months of late winter and early spring and I began to think that we might reach our destination safely within just a few more days. We began to see signs, trails and pathways, hulf prints, bits of hair clinging to the brush, that indicated we were on or near the road leading to the sanctuary. We fell into a kind of complacency, thinking that beyond the next turn or over the next hill we would find our salvation.

It did not occur to me that if we could see and follow the signs, the human hunters could follow them as well. And, so, we were caught in their trap.

I plodded beside one of the carts keeping my eyes fixed on the top of a tree which showed against the sky above the pines. The trees might mean that a stream or lake was near. I was a good foot taller than the largest of the male hulfs and had been walking with my shoulders hunched forward under my heavy tattered and dirty shirt so I would not present a noticable target in case we were observed by humans who might be lurking in the forests.

My height made walking difficult, for I had to cut down my normal stride to accommodate my speed to the progress of those pulling the carts. After months of stumbling along behind them my back and shoulders ached unmercifully.

We had been twenty-six in number when we left the headland in March and we had moved slowly but unfaltering, sometimes covering as much as twenty miles in a night. Now there were only twenty-two of us. Four had sickened and died within the first month, and those of us who remained had weakened from hunger and exposure.

As our provisions dwindled, we transferred as much as we could to the largest of the carts and abandoned the smaller in a copse beside a stream where we had stayed for two days and nights.

The single cart and its load had become a living thing, a determined, nearly unmovable object, everlastingly pitting its weight against our strength.

I shifted the two pistols hidden under my coat and shivered a little. I had hoped to find warmth and sunshine as we trekked southward, gentle breezes that might restore strength to all of us. The hope had become a jest. Bitter cold had followed implacably from the moment we had left the great stone house on the headland above the village.

It would settle down with deathly frostiness as soon as the sun was gone, numbing us into mindless zombies and shivering the uncomplaining pups, lying so still in the bottom of the cart.

I lost all track of time. Not until we crossed a broad, winding ice-free river whose banks were lined with crocus and Queen Anne's Lace did I realize we had journeyed into Spring. It was the twenty-fourth of June! Three long, miserable months since we had begun our escape from certain death. In that time, not one of us had been injured or killed by the humans, although we often saw them in the

distance watching us as we passed and once we were pursured by hunters on horses. They gave up the chase when their mounts were unable to follow us through the dense forests.

But it was there, in the forest, that we found the abandoned homes and farms, the abandoned hopes and dreams, of the humans who had succumbed to the disease of the hulfs. Empty houses stared back at us with sightless eyes, the dreams of their owners dead and forgotten, leaving populous, prosperous villages to be overrun by encroaching forests.

In the wagon, I heard one of the she-hulfs moan. I halted the company and walked to the back, lowering the heavy tailboard. A shehulf lay in one corner, the piled-up provisions towering above her, a lovely girl barely in her mid-teens, scarcely heavy enough to depress the thick pallet beneath her. At the sight of me she smiled, but her lips were colorless and pinched, and her golden eyes were bright with fever.

"What is it?" I asked.

"She is pregnant, Gill," Cybele said behind me. "The pup will come soon. Are we near any place where we can stop?"

"There must be something soon." I placed a hand on her forehead, felt the heat and smoothed back her golden hair. It was damp beneath my fingers. Cybele took out a cupful of water, then raised her with an arm beneath her shoulders and let the girl drink.

She took but a swallow. Cybele found a cloth, moistened it from the cup, and gently bathed her forehead and temples.

She moaned again. For an instant we stood staring down at her swollen belly, rounding the folds of the long cloak which covered her. Her lean face was tight with despair.

"How did this happen? I asked.

Cybele's eyebrows went up a half inch. "How? Do you not understand the mating?"

"Yes, of course," I stammered. "But I mean when did this happen, how without my seeing or knowing?"

"The males are stealthy and filled with cunning, Gill. Wherever we're going, we'd better hurry, or we'll have a pup before we get there."

I straightened and pulled the covers over the she-hulf, then swept back my long unshorn hair. The company plodded on through the early morning toward a sagging house across a meadow of knee-high grass.

The sun glowed bronze through a haze, and was already riding above the towering tops of the trees. The temperature was slowly rising and the mist swept from the meadow on a light breeze.

We did not see the humans, coiled like a panther, waiting at the edge of the trees, waiting to shoot and hack with their terrible guns and axes, waiting to kill us all, hulfs and human alike, as if we were all so much garbage to be disposed of at the command of madmen.

Within minutes after reaching the house, I had a fire going and a kettle filled with vegetables hanging on a tripod.

The heat repelled the coldness. Squatting down beside the flames, for a time we could almost believe that we had reached the end of the journey. The woods around us seemed friendly, like the windrow of some quiet farm. The cart was as secure as a small fortress. The girl on the bed inside it was young and healthy and happy, and seemed safe from any harm. I lifted her gently and carried her into the old house while Cybele carried in the padded pallet. When she was comfortable, I went outside to sit by the fire.

The stew began to simmer. I rose and went to talk to the other hulfs, who had all gathered to sleep at the edge of the woods, to get a feel for their hopes, and to give them encouragement for the journey ahead of us.

I stopped in the half-darkness of the trees. Behind me the clearing showed bright, giving me the sensation of standing outside a window and looking into a lighted room. I lowered my hands to close about the coolness of the pistols and stood frozen, looking at the sandy ground marked with human boot-prints.

I moved a few steps forward, bent over as if in a dream, and touched a piece of rope circling one of the trees. From there I moved on quietly to touch three others. All were covered with blood. I could see that from the flickering rays of the rising sun which danced through the trees, bringing light from the clearing.

I knelt and pulled one of the pistols from my belt, scanning the brightening forest for signs of humans or hulfs. At a distance, I could see the form of a man behind one of the trees, his fat belly and face silhouetted against the light from the clearing.

I leveled the pistol and cocked the hammer. Suddenly, someone grabbed me about the neck and pulled me backward, snatching the pistol from my hand at the same time.

"They have taken four of us," a voice rasped in my ear. It was Jack, the Alpha male.

"Taken? Where are they taking them?" I croaked.

"To death with their knives."

"Oh, God, oh, God."

"Your god cannot help them now," Jack said as he released me from his powerful grip.

"How many are they?" I asked.

"I counted nine with knives and guns. They knew we were coming, Gill. I think they have been following us for days."

"Why could you not smell them?"

"They have covered their clothing and skin with a lotion that masks their scent. But I have smelled that scent since the day we were at the river."

We sat in silence for some time, waiting for the assault that we knew must surely come. Jack leaned back against the base of a tree and raised his snout to the sky, his nostrils flaring.

"They are still here," he said. "Where are the other hulfs?" "They have gone by ones and twos back to house. There is some safety there." "I'm sorry, Jack," I said weakly, close to tears. "For what?" "For the hulfs. For the deaths of the hulfs." "It was not your fault. Come." We went back and stood leaning against the cart. Steam came up from the kettle of water and hovered above the simmering stew.

My back grew cold, and I draped a blanket about my shoulders, reaching again for the pistols in my belt, to assure myself they were still there, ready and deadly. Many times I heard a rustle, but it was only wind in the treetops.

The fire had died and twice been replenished when we heard the young she-hulf scream. Hours later, she gave birth to a son. Some of the females bathed the tiny, squalling pup, wrapped it in clean old linen, and laid it beside its mother.

Her lips moved feebly. "I'm very tired."

"You have a son," someone said in the shadows.

She closed her eyes. After a while, Cybele put her hand on the girl's ashen face and found it cold.

Across the clearing a shot flashed out from the trees, then, closer, another one. I ran out to crouch behind the shelter of the cart, pistols out and ready.

"Come inside, fool," Jack growled. "The air will not stop their bullets but perhaps the timbers of the house will."

He grabbed my arm and dragged me inside where most of the survivors were clustered together for protection.

Hideous and demonic figures broke from the trees, yelling and screaming. I held my fire, then coolly picked out the nearest hunter and shot him. He fell, his arms sprawled wide. Another was killed seconds later.

"Seven more," I thought. "And I have but ten more rounds."

It didn't seem to matter, for the thought of the dead she-hulf, herself no more than a child, lying in the next room had crept deep into my soul.

There was a noise outside. Hurried steps bounded up on the porch, and someone knocked at the door. I flung it open.

A hulf I did not recognize stood outside in a long leather coat. "There's firing!"

"Where?"

"Just south of here. Not very far."

"Where were you?"

"In the forest, following the nine humans who took the four hulfs. I turned from the trail and heard firing as I was coming in."

At a soft command, water was dumped on the flaming logs, raising a cloud of ruby-colored steam. More water came, and the fire died.

I stood by the half-opened door waiting for the humans to attack in force. Jack and some of the other hulfs watched at the windows.

Cybele stood, and was trembling. "Be careful, Gill."

"I'm always careful, girl. I've been careful all my life. Too careful, perhaps. Now is the time for madness and action or we shall all perish." I pulled her close and kissed her. "Nothing living shall kill me tonight."

"Nothing but another human's gun," she whispered, pressing her fingers to her lips as if to seal the kiss there forever. "Be careful."

I motioned for Jack and two of the other hulfs to go with me into the forest to get behind the hunters. Together we went down from the porch and crept around to the back of the house.

Cybele watched without speaking. My eyes swept the camp, darkened now except for the sputtering fire.

When we had reached the edge of the forest, I turned to Jack and indicated that he and one hulf should go to the left while I would take the other hulf to the right. The idea was to get behind the humans and kill them one at a time.

"We'll circle to meet and home in on the noise of any firing. Watch for an ambush."

I had no worries about Jack. He could travel the woods in daylight or darkness with the speed and silence of a spectre.

When I was certain we were behind the humans, I stopped and listened. There was no sound of firing, but somewhat northward I heard a soft whistle. An instant later, to the left, it was answered by another. The hulf touched my shoulder.

"Not humans," he said quietly.

I nodded and we moved forward toward the sound.

"Let's push on. There'll be no more firing. Whatever it is, their work is done. The two dead humans have spooked them. They're probably wondering how hulfs could have killed their comrades."

We approached a clearing and pulled up short. There was smoke in the air, and the smell of burned powder. To our right were the last few embers of a dying fire in the camp where the humans had waited.

Jack, with the other hulf in tow loomed from the shadows, ghostlike, to stand beside us.

"We've circled the clearing," Jack said grimly. "We found the bodies of the four taken earlier. They were skinned and their paws cut off. They took the heads of the two females."

"Come away from the fire," I said, "in case they are watching. We'll make easy targets in the glow of this smoke."

"The seven hunters are over there," Jack said, pointing toward the south. They are all together, hiding, afraid. No one is watching for us."

"In that case," I said, "they will be easy pickings for my pistols."

"Are you certain you want to do that?" Jack asked. "You are human; they are humans. Is it not murder in the eyes of your laws?"

"Self-defense is not murder."

"It is if one is a hulf."

I had no answer for that. I checked the pistols to make certain I had ten rounds. I silently wished I had more. "The Lord provideth, and equally taketh away."

"Nonsense," Jack growled. "But do what you must. I will take these hulfs back to the house to protect the others. Be careful; someone or something besides the hunters is in this forest tonight."

They moved silently, drifting away like the smoke from the dying campfire.

Tomorrow you'll christen the baby and bury his mother with a few words from the Scriptures, I thought, as I made my way into the forest toward the hunters. I tried to think of words of Scripture I could say and found I could not remember any. They were lost two hundred years behind me.

It was strangely silent as I crept forward into the greening forest.

There were no animal sounds, no bird calls, no human voices from the camp now only yards away. Smoke from their fire curled upward and was borne away on the breeze. The sun was now already above the trees and I could see the hunters slumped around the meager fire as if asleep.

I stopped at the edge of the small clearing. No one was on watch. I looked for the bags holding the hulf skins and heads, but could not see them anywhere. From my left came a single soft whistle and from the right, moments later, came an answer.

"Not human," the hulf had told me.

I eased forward until I was less than ten feet from the nearest sleeping hunter. There was a pungent smell of death in the camp. I searched again for the bags of hulf skins and realized with a start that the hunters were not sleeping at all—they were dead; killed where they sat by some unseen and unheard creature.

Horrified, I stood and backed away from the goulish scene, then turned and

began to run as fast as I could through the tangled brush. I had not gone ten yards when two large male hulfs stepped into view before me. I tried to stop, tried to turn away, but one grabbed me around the neck and flung me to the ground, mouth open wide to crush my throat.

"Hold!" came a harsh command from the shadows.

I looked beyond the hulf to see a large, muscular male appear from behind a tree. He waved his arm and the hulf holding me down sprang away, leaving me breathless and choking.

The great hulf stepped to my side and bent near me, sniffing and snorting. I feared then that he would kill me himself.

He straightened and relaxed a bit. "You have the scent of a she-hulf on you," he said. "The young one with the newborn pup in the house yonder. And another, perhaps, as well."

I could not answer, only nod affirmatively.

"Do you lead them to the sanctuary?"

Nodding again.

"We have been watching you for some time, wondering where you are going, what you are doing. This morning we thought you had led them here into the trap to be killed by the humans."

I shook my head no.

"I see that. If you seek the sanctuary, you are leading them in the wrong direction. You took the wrong trail at the river two days ago and you are moving away from the sanctuary. It is a trap the humans have devised by leaving bits of fur and paw prints to make it appear as though hulfs have gone down the one path while they swept away the tracks from the other."

I swallowed away the dryness in my throat and managed to sit upright. I looked back toward the hunter's camp. "Did you... ?"

"Of course we did. We cannot leave this baggage alive to kill our brothers and sisters. Some of the hulfs are already cleaning the campsite of the refuse so other hunters will never know what happened there. More are back at the river to make sure the trap signs are removed. It is something we try to do every day. It is why we are here."

"How many are you?" I asked.

He raised his head suspiciously and eyed me askance. "We are many," he said simply. "But you are now only nineteen, counting the newborn pup."

"The mother died," I said quietly.

He grimaced and looked away into the forest, growling deep in the heat of his throat. Presently, he turned back to me. "Eighteen, then. Do you have lactating females to care for the pup? If you do not, we will take him and our camp will raise

him."

"I don't know. I'll ask when I return."

"Come." He extended his hand—still human but lengthened and distorted and clawed and covered with dark fur—and snatched me from the ground as easily as he might lift an infant. "We have much to do this day."

I wanted to ask his name but knew he would only say, 'hulf,' if he answered at all.

The world is not dying; it is being killed. And we know who is killing it, for they have names and addresses. They hold positions of power. They write the human laws. The enforce those laws at the point of a gun... And they punish by death.

"I would spend days in those intercrossing mirror worlds which ran into one another, trembled, vanished, only to reappeared again," the raggedy man said softly.

"I gave my mind, my body, my soul to those fathomless distances, those echoing vistas, those separate universes cutting across my own and existing, despite my consciousness of them, in the same place at the same time. That extended reality, separated from me by the smooth surface of silvered glass, drew me towards itself by a kind of unknowable, intangible touch, dragging me into the gleaming surface, as if into a mysterious abyss.

"I was drawn towards the apparition which posed before me when I came near the mirror and which strangely doubled my being. I tried to imagine how this other was different from me, how it was possible that my right hand should be his left, and that all the fingers of my hands should change places.

"My thoughts were confused when I attempted to probe that enigma, to solve it. In this world, where everything could be touched, where voices were heard I lived, actually, and in that reflected world, which it was only possible to imagine, was he, the phantom, the ghost. He was almost myself and yet not really myself; he repeated all my movements, but not a single one of those movements exactly matched my own.

"He, that other, that phantom, knew something I could not divine, he held a secret hidden from my understanding; a secret that would soon come crashing down upon me to fill me with terror and wonder.

"But I noticed that each mirror had its own separate and special world. Put two mirrors in the very same place, one after the other, and there will arise two different universes. And in different mirrors before which I posed, there would rise before me different apparitions, all of them similar to me but never exactly like me and never exactly like the others.

"According to the strange conditions of their worlds they take the form of the person who poses before the glass but under this borrowed image they each preserved their own personal characteristics.

"There were some worlds of mirrors which I loved; others which I hated. I did not love all my doubles. I felt most were hostile toward me, if only because they were forced to drape themselves in my likeness.

"There were some whom I despised. There were others, on the other hand, whom I feared, who were too strong for me and who dared in their turn to mock me to do as they demanded.

"I smashed the mirrors where these hostile doubles lived. I would not look into them. I hid them, gave them away, even broke them into pieces.

"But every time I destroyed a mirror I wept for hours, knowing that I had broken to pieces a distinct, distant universe. And hateful, terrible faces stared up at me from the broken fragments of the worlds I had scattered upon the floor."

I returned to the abandoned house, accompanied by twelve guardian hulfs, eight of them adult males, four of them adult females, but they were certainly not all who were in the forest that night.

Our frightened company were huddled in one corner of the room sharing the vegetable stew. They were elated when they saw the guardians and and began enthusiatic conversations. Some of them knew a few of the guardian hulfs as being from the village from which they, themselves, had recently fled.

The alpha male guardian hulf asked about the newborn pup and learned we had no lactating females. He told one of his females to take the pup and, because she was lactating, she began nursing it. He let us know that they would take the pup to their camp and raise it as their own.

I named the alpha male Apollo and the nursing female Naomi, although I never addressed them by those names because I feared it might offend them to be called by human names.

Cybele brought me a cup of still warm stew. "Are you okay?" she asked. "You look strange and you are so quiet."

"I'm okay now that I am back here with you. It was a cruel morning and a sad one."

"It is not your fault that the hulfs were taken. Don't punish yourself for something you cannot or could not prevent." She looked at the cup of stew I held in my trembling hands. "Drink now," she said tenderly.

I lifted the cup and drank a bit of the broth. "The hulfs have told me we are going in the wrong direction," I said. "We will have to go back to the river where the trails diverged, or cut across from here if there is a trail which will take us to the sanctuary."

"Yes, there is a secret way, but it leads to a large lake where we may take a ferry across. It is but two days through the forest. If the ferry is not there, or if the captain will not or cannot take us, we will have to go around. It will be a month or

more if we go around; only four days if we can cross."

"Then let us hope we can cross," I said as I finished the cup of stew. "Did anyone say how far the sanctuary is from the lake?"

"Two more days." Cybele said. "They said we would be safe from harm once we cross the lake."

"Or journey around it."

"Yes." She looked away briefly and shifted awkwardly. "You kissed me, Gill," she said so softly that I had to lean forward to hear.

"Yes, I did. Should I not have done it? I didn't mean anything by it. It is a human gesture toward someone they care about. It is meant to reassure the other that everything will be okay."

"For someone you love?"

"Well, yes, I suppose that's the way to say it."

"And do you love me?"

"Dear Cybele, I have loved you from the first day when we met on the path to the stone house."

"You never told me."

"Because it is not possible for us to be together. We live in different worlds. You have the world of the hulfs and I ... ."

She touched my lips with a finger. "I, too, have loved you and no other since that first day. But I know we cannot be together. Our different worlds will not allow it. Still, we can be companions for many years."

I did not have the heart or the courage to tell her how different our worlds really were, that I might one day simply vanish, fall into a mirror and simply vanish. I could not screw up the courage to explain it, to tell her that I was two hundred years old and that if I did not vanish into a mirror, I might just drop dead. I wanted so badly to say it, but I could not. And so I simply said, "Yes."

The raggedy man began to weep. Not aloud, not pitifully, but silently. Tears crept down his brown, wrinkled cheeks to fall into his lap.

"I'm sorry," he said after a time. His lips tembled. He shook his head from side to side. "I'm sorry. I loved her so."

"And she loved you."

"And I deserted her at her hour of need...at their hour of greatest need... by doing that which I feared so much. I fell into this world where I have lived as a pauper, longing only to return to my most beloved Cybele."

In the days when the hulf disease began, there was little trouble between the hulfs and men. They lived apart—the men in the villages and farms and the hulfs in the swamps and thickets and on the wide grassy meadows between the villages.

Sometimes a horse or cow would stray into the marshes or meadows to become a meal, and sometimes the hulfs would find one already dead, and drive off the vultures and feral cats, and feast well to their heart's content for days.

The hulfs of the old time were clumsy of foot and dull-coloured, with rough fur and large heads, many of them misshapen and ugly. They came every spring north into the villages, after the willows turned green and before the fruit trees flowered, when the grass on the wide meadows grew long. They came only in small groups then, each pack an alpha male and two or three females with a pup or two, having their own hunting territory, and they went again to hunt in the foothills when the Harlequin Maples were red and the antelope came down from the mountains.

But, as the disease evolved, the hulfs became sleek and swift, brave and cunning; the males strong and handsome, the females lithe and lovely. The pups were simply beautiful to behold by the time I had fallen into their world.

It was their custom to hunt in the open, going into cover only in the heat of the day. They avoided the long stretches of tangled forest, preferring the openness of meadows and farms near the edges of the villages where they often found scraps of food thrown out by humans.

It was difficult, if not impossible, to come upon them unawares. They were not fighters; their teeth were only for prey, but if they were provoked or threatened, once they began, no living thing came near them; no other living creature could withstand their power and ferocity.

And in those early days when men seemed to be trying to account for the disease and to find a cure, humans, by and large, seemed harmless; indeed, many wanted to do all they could to help the sad and hopeless hulfs.

But no utterance of prophecy warned the hulfs of the terrible savagery that was to come, of the clubs and guns and axes to be wielded to drive the packs from the villages into the dystopian world of terror and blackness beneath the city streets, beneath the darkness, beneath the thin line between self and the unspeakable world of monsters and murder that was to replace the wide meadows and the freedom of the earth.

Season changes had compensations. The bitter cold, which lasted for intense, shivering periods that winter and sent us sometimes from our beds to shiver about the edge of a roaring fire, equally rid the encampment of the pesky insects and brought great flocks of wild ducks and geese into the nearby rivers and lakes.

Relief from the cold came with spring, but the insects returned, and a new caution was necessary against the deadly snakes and panthers and bears which had come out from hibernation to bask in the sun.

But it was worth trudging through the thin, lingering snow and ankle-deep icy marshes just to smell again the sweetness of blossoming trees and flowers,

and to know that the fish of the lakes and streams would soon begin to rise again to be snatched by a quick, clawed hand.

Most humans, and especially their children, had never seen hulfs closely, but soon they saw them every day as they began to raid out from their lairs on the edges of the villages, joining and raiding together in search of food. The hulfs in the countryside came together in larger and stronger packs, forming communities around many of the abandoned farms that dotted the countryside.

The bears and panthers had become afraid of them, and when they caught wind of a hulf they turned aside. When the humans saw this, they, too, became afraid of the hulf living on the swiftness of their limbs and the deep, dark, red heat of their throats.

And many humans began to keep guns and axes beside their doors to drive away or kill any hulf who might stray too close. They surrounded themselves with fear and loathing, never suspecting they might, one day, also become a creature of the darkness to be loathed and feared by those who loved them but a day before.

Apollo and Naomi came to me in the evening to say that they would lead us to the secret trail to the lake, would take us as far as they could before turning back to guard and protect any others who might seek the sanctuary by the same path we had traveled.

Naomi was nursing the pup and I watched unabashed the tender scene, knowing that the pup would be safe and loved, growing someday to a strong adult, running free and hunting the marshes and meadows of the sanctuary.

"Sanctuary is but eight days away if you are fortunate enough to cross the lake. But the ferry is not always at the lake," said Apollo. "If it is taking others across, and if it left only a day before, or the morning before you arrive, it will be eight days before it returns. It is not safe on this side of the lake. Human bounty hunters have discovered the pier and they lurk nearby, waiting for some luckless straggler to arrive... ."

"Then they kill!" Naomi growled, slashing the air with her fingers. "And they take their skins and the feet of the males and the heads of the females back to the villages to prove they have killed those who make the pups so they can claim their bounties."

"They are paid small fees for males," Apollo said. "Larger fees for the females because when they kill a female, they are killing the future of the packs. Fewer pups means we soon will be gone forever."

"I am weary," said the raggedy man. "I should find a place to bathe and change into these clothes you have brought me. Then I must arrange my mirrors and try to return to Cybele."

I looked at my watch and realized that it was evening. Outside, the sun was

already on the horizon and it would soon be dark.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked.

"Not really. If the mirrors are arranged properly, I will vanish and some other man or creature will appear in my place. If not, then we will continue our conversation tomorrow."

"If you go—fall into the mirror, I mean—will the man who replaces you know what happened in the world where you left the hulfs?"

"If he is from that world, yes, I suppose he will. But it has been two years. How many adventures will he have survived in so long a time?"

"Yes," I said softly. "How many adventures?"

"And he might not be from the world of the hulfs. He might be from the past, or from a future so distant that he would not recognize this world at all. It might not even be a human."

"I see," I said, standing to go. I reached out and took the raggedy man's wrinkled brown hand in my own. "If I do not see you again, then I wish you a safe journey and hope you find those you left behind and loved so much."

The raggedy man said nothing, stood with lips pursed and eyes bright with tears. He took the book from the large box and gave it to me.

I walked away, then, without looking back.

And, so, the raggedy man's story ends. When I returned the next morning, everything was gone. The boxes, the mirrors, the food and clothing, the easels, even the folder of matches and the candle had vanished as if they had never existed at all.

No man or creature was lurking in the dark building to explain what had transpired the previous night. I want to believe that the transfer occured and that the newcomer, eager to escape the filthy delelict building, had thrown everything into the trash bin to hide any evidence of his arrival and had then gone into the outside world to live another fantastic adventure.

I want to believe that the raggedy man returned to the world of the hulfs, returned to Cybele, and lived with her in the sanctuary until the end of his days.

But I would never know.

Only the paw prints of a large canine were slightly visible upon the dusty concrete floor. But the pattern was of two paws only, as if the creature walked upon its hind legs in the manner of a human.

I had one more task to do. I took the book to the library on my way to work, dropping it unnoticed into the night return slot.

I never saw the raggedy man again and realized he had never told me his name and had never explained why or how he had fallen into this world.

They say in hell is an Eternal Fire, Yet, it does not burn all sinners alike.

THE WINDMILLS OF MARS

Author's note:

The discarded debris of the past lies upon the frayed carpets of our minds until we find the courage to sweep it away.

I don't want people for one second to think Richard's story is my own disguised. It was always meant to be a work of fiction, even if it is based loosely on real events in either my own life or the lives of others. There is no real message as such; it is just about all the strange and invisible and largely unexplained things that happen in anyone's life: grappling with our own enigmatic windmills, vague memories of past lives, out-of-control present lives, and thoughts and hopes for something better in a future life.

Everything that happens in this tale happens in 10 months, from the time a boy is born dead to the time he is revived and is taken home from hospital to the time he receives his "soul" ten months later. This is birth and death and rebirth as remembered by a breach-born infant. I'm not saying everything happened to me personally, but it's stuff I know all about.

My life is much more interesting and happy than anything I describe in The Windmills of Mars. I can't say the manuscript is based on anything I've done or I'd ruin my life and destroy my reputation and the reputations of many people I love and cherish. All I'll say is that it's a personal voyage through the world of dreams and memories because that's what I know about. I grew up with the dream of death and rebirth and retelling it here has enabled me to get rid of a lot of rubbish in my life but, while the telling has exorcised many long suppressed demons, it has awakened legions more.

This is a tale of three interwoven lives lived by a single entity in a cosmic second.

PROLOGUE

"*Time is the substance from which I am made. Time is a river which carries me along, but I am the river; it is a tiger that devours me, but I am the tiger, it is a fire that consumes me, but I am the fire.*"

Jorge Louis Borges

HOW BRIGHTLY WE BURN

Stretch sensually. Inhale. Exhale. Settle into exquisite dreams that don't exist when we manage to untangle our minds in the morning.

How brightly we burn in our time. How brightly! But was the Architect who struck this fire so derisive as to extinguish the flame forever at the final trembling exhalation?

The heavens burn with the fires of a billion stars that, one by one, explode into darkness. As above, so below, we are admonished. Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Oxidize.

Oh, how brightly we might burn if we could but believe we might burn forever. How brightly! And might we not? The mighty kings of old believed that, once their fire faded here, they became stars of the heavens. And once the fire of their star failed in heaven, they became again men of Earth.

Can it be so?

There is just this much fire. The Architect can hold it all in one hand and it wouldn't weigh an ounce.

Every star, embraced by a zillion cubic miles of blackness will burn brightly for an appointed time and die.

Inhale. Exhale. Burn. Die.

Hug the pillow and tug the comforter over your shoulders. Settle into the senseless dreams that confound us so when we manage to untangle our tangled thoughts in the morning.

Morning. How brightly it burns! Light streams through an open window; the fire of a single star just this far from exploding into a trillion shards of darkness.

But, how brightly it burns in its time. Oh, how brightly!

What is the speed of darkness?

The trees shed their burning autumn coats of many colors, drop them to the ground in rustling heaps, there to vanish, and slumber through the silent winter of gloom. Will we sleep as well in our own silent winters, I wonder.

Inhale. Exhale. Sleep. Burn.

The mystery of our self-extinguishing fire lies in the force it doesn't use; its ability to find its way to the far side of the Architect's multiverse while, with irresolute ambivalence, unable to comprehend the Architect's complex formula—that stultifying equation of zeros to the billionth power—a part of us simply stands sullenly and watches the fire explode into darkness.

Yet, how brightly we burn in our time!

Can it be by accident alone that we are here, wherever it is that we have fallen? Can it be that our fire made its way across light years of elsewhen only to discover the portal opened upon little more than a murky swamp?

One cell creature, burning brightly with a fire it could not feel, could not understand. Inhale. Exhale. Eat and be eaten. Burn and Die. Swim or sink. Transform. Transmogrify. Transmigrate. Transmutate. Trance... .

Tiniest of things seen only under a microscope, burning with defiant fire, seeking the dry land, reaching for the wide, imperious sky, streaming one by one into the vast burning forest, coiling and gleaming one upon the other in shafts of light until they are lost in the greening shade. Wind and rain did not perplex them. Scudding clouds borne by burning air, hurrying shadows beneath, did not perplex them.

Is that what we were? Have we come so far from the dim shadows of the forest that we can no longer remember how brightly we burned there; storm and dust forgotten, the corroded wheels of time all broken and laid aside?

Or were we never that? Were we more? (Why can't we remember?) Or Less? Or nothing at all even now? Was there always only the Architect's Fire burning brightly in the immortal furnace? (And why can't we remember?)

We have sprinkled the flame with holy water; not to make the great flame greater, but to make the greater flame less in a vain attempt to comprehend it. The failing light tenders no terror within us. Our understanding fails proportionally to the fading glow. It seems natural to let go the fragrance of the Architect. (Why can't we remember what It smelled like?)

Alpha and Omega brightly burning.

From those to whom fire is given much is expected. Inhale (but remember to turn away from the smoke). Exhale (but remember to cover your mouth). Lean toward the light (but remember to shade your eyes). Don't look too deeply into

the past lest you discover there something you wish not to know.

Keep the faith. Remember the covenant. Hands off! Don't touch! Mustn't pry off the lid to see what's inside. Ix-nay, Pandora. Taboo. It's either something dreadful or it's nothing at all. In either case, we lose a little more of the fire.

Believing without a shred of empirical evidence, is what faith is. And, so, we leave the lid untouched. The fire fades and we pretend not to notice. Each day the depth of our vision is diminished. Darkly through the glass we see the veil is coarse and heavy; woof and warp tightly loomed.

Dimly we perceive that it is a dream, a phantasm of troubled minds like a disease we have caught from others somewhere along the way, singing hosannas in a dimly lit room smelling of candle wax and spilled sacramental wine.

Men of dark cloth seeking fame and acclaim on the quick roads to glory bid us to leap headlong into the baptismal pool if we dare and, once in, we wonder if we should get out while we still can.

But can we?

Little do we understand that water extinguishes fire when we are coaxed into the crystal pool. Little do we understand the words uttered darkly that we will emerge different, changed from what we were when we plunged thoughtlessly into its unknown depths. What life was left beneath its rippling tides?

How much of the Original Fire was quenched there? And what did we become when again we set our feet upon dry land? We understand the significance of immersion only later: Now we must believe what the men of dark cloth believe or to hell with us!

Why do men of dark cloth believe they can improve the Lux Aeterna by dousing it with holy water? What was the true meaning of their words when they told us that, once we were bathed in that divine water, we would not seek the empty world again? What was so wrong with the Fire and the World that they had to minimize it so?

Simple hopes and dreams of humankind are skewered on the barbs of reasonable doubt. Is it a dream? And are we brave enough to face the pale rider waiting just beyond the reach of the snarling watchdogs? Are we brave enough to leave the wane, unhappy ghosts of departed friends and lovers to whatever fate awaits them, our old, blind hands groping for some small joy that does not vex our minds?

One door closes; another opens, said the men of dark cloth. They saved the secret door for last and jealously kept it for themselves. History will damn their death-cold lies and expose them for the cruel mad demagogues they are.

Is it but a dream that wounds our hearts day upon day, lifetime upon lifetime, defying reason, dashing the hopes of believers and skeptics alike?

Unfathomable mystery, this one unquestioned Miracle, encompassing every attribute of the Architect, power within itself, the whole greater than any part, omnipresent and in its own light higher and wider than heaven. It is more than we can even imagine, this incorporeal being, who, in the infinity of space, perceives all things as One.

We struggle toward the Light, seeking everywhere the true commandments, the eternal power that binds everything into the One.

And find it not.

And so we invent the dream, the myth, the Miracle to sustain us in our anguish at having not discovered the endless joy; gathering here only a shell, there a pebble, here a fragment of bone, there a parched page of scripture, turning them one by one and expecting to find a message inscribed on the bottom: ***Made By God.***

And while our attention is diverted thus, the whole truth flees from us into the vastness of the cosmos.

We are like bandits, leading two lives in a vain attempt to hide our true selves from the never-sleeping eyes of a fearful warden, the gatekeeper and the celestial accountant who knows our name, age and every sin the men of dark cloth insist we have committed.

Men of the dark cloth have made of us wildeyed sorcerers seeking to sweep away the cobwebs of their ancient sophistry to wage war against Chaos. They point at us with trembling, frightened fingers and mock us as madmen who will inherit nothing less than the everlasting Fire.

That which we thought was light is merely the shadow of something we cannot see. That which we believe is life is but a desolate mirage that will desert us at the final hour to leave us the poorer for our trust. What can it mean? The throbbing anthill with its thousand eyes, the terrible sky with its billion lights, all to be dimmed and crushed under the scourge of the lasting Fire. What does it mean?

Birth, the manifesting of intelligence into flesh on earth, is nothing more than the beginning of death. Life! We dare not let it languish! We dare not indulge in Passion's Despair! Birth and life and death are driven to their final night before Time's merciless and unforgiving scythe and all the while the chapel bell peals a mournful tocsin. Who could have dreamed it, and what does it mean?

The tools we have forged outlast the men who use them, and what does it mean? How strange that inanimate things should outlast us. What in the world does it mean? This tiny grain of sand that bears us relentlessly about the sun in trails of electric mist will one day burn in the fire that gives it life, and none living shall outlast it. How brightly shall it burn! And what does it mean?

The Great pyramids have outlasted their builders by sixty centuries. The words of the prophets have prevailed twenty centuries after they were spoken.

What does it mean? Why did they bother to tell us at all?

Those who follow the Architect's Law say we have no need to know. It is enough to simply believe it has meaning after all. I am troubled by their veiled words and decrees. It seems unreasonable to simply believe. Shall I not learn, one day, that heaven is nothing more than a middling dream, without substance, without promise?

Men of dark cloth, convinced that if they remove their hands from the Light it will dim and fade and flicker and fail forever—as if their hands alone sustain that Fire—stand stoically, eyes glazed and fixed upon some distant horizon we cannot discern, and recite their rote message: "It is enough to simply believe. How can you doubt His power from whom all blessings flow? World without end. Amen. Amen."

And, Oh, their words trouble me greatly for they raise more questions to be answered, but are answered not by any of them. By their incompletion, they have stolen my faith that, once, even Despair was powerless to destroy.

Is it but a dream in the mind of a fitful sleeper? What will happen when it awakens? Have we gone astray from the Light, from Truth, from the path that leads to Completion? How shall we now return to the crumbling walls that sheltered us from the lie when the walls are no more to be found and the lie is greater than truth ever was?

Forgive. Forget.

We forgive and forget and, in forgetting, remember but vaguely how brightly we once burned. Through all the abysmal depths of space we are blown as dust motes by a cold, dark wind we cannot feel, driven by a music we cannot hear while Hope creeps about our feet like a hungry cat.

Gods of gold. Gods of clay. Not one to lend an ear to misery and discontent. Cold crucified arms outstretched to embrace cold silence, cold air, empty room. There is no fire in the image there on the altar. It is the bleakness of the fathomless sea; ice of the barren Arctic. Its color is fair but the fire was not struck in the image and it cannot, does not, will not, hear our lament.

If the Architect is anything at all, it is indifferent. It has other stars to spawn, other bones to pick. It yawns and settles into a mad dream of tomorrow, shrugging off today, unconcerned how slightly we burn.

How slightly these days. How slightly.

Here now! What is that millennial beast who trudges drunkenly toward Jerusalem to be born, its hour come 'round at last? How brightly it burns in its time!

See how brightly it burns! It moves like fire within fire there before me, its deathless torch arching madly above, exalting all weakness to power, whispering with such faith that even the elect must be deceived.

How brightly it burns, Promethean fire all around, scorning all before it. "Take this splendor into the New Age I shall command," it wails. "Carry it into the land I dare not tread."

How brightly burns the torch as, passed from hand to hand along the timeless corridor, it transforms the dull to keen, mean to gentle, lumbering to swift.

But it is the wizard behind the curtain, blinding all with parlor tricks only slightly more seductive than those whose torch is failing in the long desolate hallway behind. It is a thief in the night, beckoning all who would follow to become kings among men, gods among the profane; higher, taller, stronger, wiser, infinitely illuminated.

And see how brightly it burns. How lovely the flame, promising comfort and succor to all who would yield to its promises.

Ah-ah! Hands off! Do not touch for this, too, is forbidden. Mustn't pry off the lid to see what is inside for fear of everlasting death in, of all things, the ever consuming fire. And so that lid, as well, remains unprized.

We are led by first one steed and then the next and it is forbidden to ask the name or destination of any. Heaven or Hell? Quo Vadis, Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

No, no! Do not ask. It is forbidden. It will be enough to simply believe.

Needle point of fire in the ruined abyss below; remote, minute, sends a subtler message to those who care to listen, holds more significance to those who dare to see than all the darkness that seeks to blot it out, yet cannot dash the passions of a lifetime.

I think, therefore am I?

How brightly we burn in our time and when the fire is gone so, too, all memory of this world we leave behind; our souls in our mouths, tasting of dampened ash.

From that lonely depth comes the Eternal voice, into the gulf beneath whence all the fire had vanished, scudding like a ship before the gale, while all around surges the mighty sea-sound of sighing rushes, one vast ebb and flow of peace, beyond earth's pain, so calm, so quiet it seems the wet nurse song, the deep soft breathing of the universal fire into the rekindled mind of man.

As I listen, that sweet voice becomes an invocation moving like fire in light among the thoughts of heaven, transforming the mortal self-soul flame into immortal consciousness.

Is there not one among us who can translate to music this long dark fight for truth? Is there not one among us to touch with beauty this long battle for the light, to grant some small victory for the spirit of man?

That which neither eyes nor self-soul can see seems doomed to defeat and

is yet unconquerable, streaming through countless time nearer to the stars once exclusively claimed by the blind, blood-emboldened Caliphs of old.

This is the most we believe: the consciousness of man, released from the soul-self at death, might once more burn in heaven.

We catch the fire from those who went before, the bearers of the torch, whether of the lie or of the truth, who could not see the goal toward which they strained. We catch their fire and carry it only a little way nearer the veil. But there must be others who wait for it; those who will carry it onward, perhaps endlessly without reward.

Is there no epic ballad for those who strove for light but could not dream even of the victory they longed so to win? No ballad for the prisoners of the lie who handed on the torch from age to age; who, step by step, drove back the night and grappled, year on year, for one more glimpse among the stars of Sovereign Fire? No paean for those who, searching inward, saw the flame dissolving into a new abyss, and strove to build and to rebuild our squandered world?

Dreamers of dreams are all faded now, grist for the mill of heaven. The rusted wheels complain and slow in their orbits. Time is ending, the wheels of heaven grinding to a halt. The appointed time seems nearer than ever before, darkly foretold by dreaming men of dark cloth.

Builders of our hope, the healers and binders of wounds, who, while tyrants drench the world with blood can, in the faint, small crackle of a flickering hearth, grapple with death like Heracles to save one frightened, wounded child; knowing, even as they do, that the children are doomed for there is no one to kiss their sunward lifted faces, no beneficent eye to adore them.

And what does it all mean?

Is there no song to touch this living universe with ultimate light, the glimmer of that great fire which over our ruined altars yet shall break in pure light to deliver us from greater terror than even Lucifer knew?

In the gloom of waxen tapers the dreamer lifts up his eyes to whatever gods might listen, pointing to the skies through the wilderness of Time and Space while the quivering organ rends the darkness.

But the dreamer finds no lamp unto his feet, no Balm in Gilead, no guide to lead him forward toward the splendor from which (he was told) he sprang; to which (he was promised) he would return.

The truth he seeks lies at his fingertips, unexplored, ignored while the dumb half-circle of the choir inhales deeply, awaiting the prompt for the first note, each voice jealous only of the voice beside it.

In the chapel vault chanted hymns ring on the heavy air while luckless errant kneeling monks and pious nuns imprisoned there sing their vespers orisons; inhaling, exhaling, burning in their appointed time and dying without so much as

wondering why or what it all means, or to whom they vow allegiance. They give no voice to that and are mute.

By what name shall we conjure the Messiah to restore us to faith, to bring us into heaven and show us the way to Light and Truth? Adad, Marduk, Adonis, Aesclepius, Apollo, Dionysus, Heracles, Zeus, Alcides, Attis, Baal, Buddha, Krishna, Hermes, Hesus, Horus, Osiris, Serapis, Indra, Ieo, Issa, Jupiter, Jove, Mithra, Wodin, Prometheus, Quetzalcoatl, Salivahana, Tammuz, Thor, Zoroaster?

To whom do these gods answer; to whom do they grant favor?

Is it a dream that in those dark dominions beyond this mortal coil we shall find life everlasting? Is the light we behold in our eyes alone? Could the Djinn conjured by Aladdin while rubbing that old patina stained lamp promise less? Is that promise, like the sun-fractured rainbow, a mirage held together by falling mists? The certainty of the universe and the spirit of man are destroyed for want of proof, and what does it all mean?

Our human nature could not be
Content with rest like this,
And even bliss could cloy, if we
Had nothing else but bliss.
Great Nature's hand, in every plan,
Had laid in wise design,
But what design, or use, is in
This theory of thine?
If, when our earth-career is done,
All conscious life must cease,
And we drift on, and on, and on,
In endless, dreamy peace;
If Heaven is but a mystic spell,
Whose glowing visions thrall,
Why should we have a life beyond?
Why have a Heaven at all?

A Thought of Heaven —Madge Morris; 1881

The goal of life is not a peaceful death; nor an instant entrance into heaven as an abode where the pious shall eternally live; nor is it the ultimate satisfying of a God of extreme justice; the "eye for an eye" God of the fear-stricken men of dark cloth.

One purpose alone persuades us, like the Navigator's star lighting the path of the mariner on life's troublesome sea: the attainment of the understanding

through which is revealed to our consciousness the real and the unreal; the eternal substance of Truth.

There can be no other purpose in the pursuit of either religion or philosophy or politics than this. Unceasing rites and ceremonies of contemplation; renunciation; prayers; fasting; penance; devotion; service; adoration; or isolation, cannot insure the attainment of Truth.

There will be no bartering; no assurance of reward for good conduct. It is not as though one would say, "Ah, ah, my child, if thou wouldst purchase Truth thou shalt follow this recipe and none other."

There is no golden promise of speedy entrance into Light, nor any exact rules, or laws or equations by virtue of which Truth is attained. Nor yet any specific time to serve before that final illumination.

"I am persuaded," said Paul the Apostle and adherent to Mithraism, "that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God."

For whom and of whom did he believe he was speaking?

Interpreted in the light of cosmic consciousness, we begin to understand that we might know and experience that boundless, deathless, perfect, satisfying, complete and all-embracing love which is the goal of immortality, which is the only speakable attribute of the Architect.

The things for which we sigh are the things we can never reach. We hold so carelessly and lightly the treasures that might lead us from the darkness.

We contemplate an unknowable future or dwell on scenes of the grim and faded past rather than live in the present which so quickly hastens from us.

The prizes for which we toil, so seemingly tempting today, prove to be, when pressed to our breasts, but worthless illusions. We grasp at shadows that spring unbidden from the deep wells of our minds, then flit from us as swiftly as fireflies, while that which casts the shadow stands in our way unsought.

And we wonder, and wonder, what was it that shivered at the edges of our eyes, never dreaming that if we shift our gaze but a little we might find it.

We feel Truth trembling at the edges of our memory, stray glimmers of thought near the rim of our understanding. We look and find it not; deep shadows pass like cadres of murmuring priests between.

And what meaning has it?

Let free the Fire of Heaven! Give each child union with that Fire within each life, the flame not to be found until, searching deeper through the inward-opening door, each child alone meets the unknowable and eternal Light, if it is to be found at all.

"*Where the profane drink, all fountains are poisoned.*
Are the profane also necessary for life?
Are poisoned fountains necessary, and stinking fires,
And filthy dreams, and mealworms in the bread?"

Thus Spake Zarathustra

Men of dark cloth close their eyes and minds, and hold their noses and beg for power. They trip us in the darkness, mock us with their scolding eyes and change their story, making it all the more difficult to comprehend, all the more unbelievable. Nowhere in their scriptures are the words "immortal" and "soul" used together. Why have they deceived us?

They pluck the mystery of life from the pages of their sermons and quench the only lights that might have saved us. Their clever words of art kill the song in our hearts and our laughter fades. Even our dreams grow old.

Flesh is weak and blood is thicker than water. Truth will out and thoughts like angels come and go. Eyes dimmed by age that once through the deep soul gazed, see not. Ears foiled by two thousand years of contradiction no longer hear. Tired, withered hands grope for love and come away with nothing.

We nod fitfully in our nightmarish sleep and claw at the empty air before us. Our fingers come back twisted and thin, our dreams but dust in the barren fields of our minds. We dream things dreamed of long ago when we were children, in distant days when dreams were trifling but were all we needed.

And what does it portend?

The threadbare fabric of the cosmos is rent by the fires of Vulcan's forge and still we burn. With dark, smouldering eyes and naked limbs, reciting endlessly the old lie, "Death Shall Have No Dominion," we go down into the crumbling earth, cold and dark and smelling of decay and worms.

And, there, shall burn no more.

Though we be as dust, is the Architect mindful of us? If so, why so? If not, why not?

Can we do nothing in life that the fire will not erase in the end? Is all that we behold no more than electric impulses on the brain, flimsy threads that bind a boundless cosmos of imagination into an unknowable something we call First Cause to hide our ignorance?

And what does it mean in any event?

What does it matter?

Stretch sensuously. Breathe deeply. In that pure realm whose darkness is our peace we settle into the nightmares that persist even if we manage to untangle our tangled minds in the morning.

The dark veil has again fallen across the far fields of space, our Captain is dead, the precious cargoes of our lives are heaped, wasted and rotting, in the hold, and the astrolabe is wrecked with the salt of twenty centuries.

Orion winks wickedly above, the forbidden fruit that so troubled Eden is gnarled and mouldy as hoarfrost, the Miracle is found to be, at best, a mirage, and Aladdin's lamp is lost forever.

How close we all come to dying, trapped in these little moments, these little unrelated vignettes, unaware of why we are here, oblivious of the journey, unconcerned about the destination. How close we come to dying before the reaper swoops down like the wrath of God to wipe out everything. How hopelessly flawed we are that we are unable to see it or understand it or convey it to others.

THE WINDMILLS OF MARS

"*Inappropriate, useless man, what magic do you imagine will come into the air when you die?"*

I'm sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire. Some days when you wake up, you think you're the same person who went to sleep in your bed the night before. You aren't. You can never be the same person today as yesterday; tomorrow as today. You can't go back and you can't go on because the god of fire with breath like turpentine won't stop chasing you. I'm lost and, oh, god, oh, god, momma, I'm afraid you'll never find me again.

Sloth-eyed dumpster girls slink in the alley below my window; black crocodiles yawning, smiling, leaning on the wall and looking up at me waving me down for a trick. I think one is pregnant and her baby will live just long enough to smother in the garbage dumpster down there in the black night with the hungry rats. She's selling herself for smokes and wine to the roughnecks from the docks or the rosy-cheeked school boys from the other side of town who climb on her for two minutes then beat the shit out of her for five so they won't have to pay for their sin, like beating her stupid washes away the dirt.

I wonder why she doesn't go back to Ohio or wherever the hell she came from and have her baby there so I don't have to think about it. Go back to school or something, get a real job and live in a real house and send her kid to church on Sunday. It's better than getting screwed and beaten stupid behind a stinking dumpster, face down in the garbage.

Rusty nails beneath my spine tearing my flesh and my life is leaking away onto the sweaty sheet. I'm not awake but I'm not asleep, either. I'm in between somewhere. When is the phone going to ring? When will a voice tell me where to go, what to do, what not to do, when to come home?

Nothing works while you're waiting. You can't make a comeback if you've never been anywhere. Look in the mirror and you'll know why you always go to bed alone. Thoughts like angels come and go.

My legs are killing me. I need to get up and walk around for a while. Five

more minutes, maybe, and I'll get up and walk around.

Dammit. I'm too good for this. I should be doing something else. If I could do something else, what would I do? I can't think of anything. I'm hopeless. You can't think of anything when you're trying to think of something. It has to come like a bolt of lightning when your mind is turned off, when you're not trying so hard to think of something.

It makes no sense, but that's the way it is.

A spider is building a trapnet in the corner of the ceiling. It will have plenty of prey, that's for sure. There are more cockroaches here than at the city dump. The foul odor of rotting garbage drifts into the room. I want to puke.

Truth is laying under my tongue so quietly that I don't even know it is there and I start speaking it out all over myself and I touch it with the tips of my fingers because this is me, who I really am, and it is a me that is so strange that a fearful surprise trembles in the space between the left and right lobes like a bloody shit wartime story that won't go away. I am the spider. The spider is me. Hiding in a silent, secret corner of the world, waiting for something to crawl into my life.

Shadows and lights move across the filthy walls and ceiling as magcars stop in the alley below. Voices murmur. Feet shuffle, doors open, close. The cars glidehum away. I can see it all in my mind without looking. I've watched it for a month, maybe, or longer.

Sometimes I feel lonely watching these things, staring down on the poured together landscape of cars and people and asphalt as it slithers like a snake across the glass of the bus windows. Sometimes I walk the streets for hours then I come back to the claustrophobic room and sleep the rest of the day away then I get up and do it all again. It makes me wonder if a god of vengeance and hate is watching over me. It makes me wonder if this is all just the smell and taste of my insanity.

I once loved a omen who was colder than a Montana snowstorm but goddamn she was beautiful. She stole everything I had and ran away with another guy. Then he killed her and ran away with everything she stole. He was sentenced to life without parole.

Sometimes victories are in the little things.

Why is the whiskey bottle empty? I can't remember having drank it all.

When will the phone ring? When will it ring?

Lately, I find I can't remember the names of people I served with in the Navy. I can see their faces like they are in little frames on the mantle, but their names are gone. I've always thought if I could remember my comrades, they would live forever but if I forgot their names they would be dead.

Looks like most of them are dead.

Once in awhile, when my mind is not trying so hard, a name will spill out of

its pigeonhole and I'll say it aloud, even if it is the middle of the night, and I'll smile, sometimes I'll laugh, like I've done something really magical.

Sleeping mind is really more awake that waking mind, I suspect.

Then I can go back to sleep although it may take me an hour or so to stop congratulating myself.

Stupid.

While I am berating myself, the phone rings and my life changes forever. In a month or two I may be back in a room like this one but, right now, I'm on the move. Goodbye, little alley cats. I can't save you now, not that I ever intended to try. You made the bed you're sleeping in. Bed of nails with one foot in the fire, foul stench wafting on the heavy night air.

I lay on the bed in my clothes, knowing I'm sleeping here for the last time, knowing tomorrow I'll take my one footlocker to look for another cache of lost treasure and just before I fall asleep I imagine a fantasy about a red-haired girl with electric green eyes.

She couldn't know it because we have never met, but I've been in love with her all my life. And I think she died before I was born. I don't know why I think of her; it's just something stuck in my head.

The prophets tell us we shall live two lives;
First when we are born and again when we die.

This is San Diego, Twelfth Federal District, two hundred and first day of the year 2054. Tomorrow the rats can have this dump; I'll be on my way to Mars. Six days before my twenty-ninth birthday. One year, three months, one week and two days after I told the Navy to piss up a rope but who's counting?

Richard Carroll Constable, I say when the spaceport inspector asks my name. I shove my hand under the code reader and it scans the rice grain size implant in the web between my right thumb and forefinger. The Inspector nods, waves me on. I drag my footlocker to the baggage conveyor, lift it on and watch it disappear behind a stainless steel wall.

I get on a turbolifter launch with forty other passengers, most of them hard rock miners, and it whisks us upward toward the loading platform of FSS Intrepid CTS111, the huge disk craft idling at Alpha Station fifty miles above Earth. Intrepid is the ship that will carry us to Mars. She's a beauty.

If you haven't launched into earth orbit from a dead standstill in a turbolifter launch, you haven't missed anything. I thought I was going to lose my breakfast, sparse as it might have been, but I kept swallowing and choking until the inertial system kicked in and we felt the mag gravity again. The miners all made jokes

and laughed nervously about who was going to puke all over the deck first. I said nothing, just pressed down into the launch chaise and sucked air because I thought I'd be the one to do it.

It is no better even when we board the Intrepid because the ships idle at reduced gravity to make cargo loading faster and lighter.

I ride sick along the maglev tube to the berthing compartment, aching in my gut and wishing I hadn't agreed to go to Mars in the first place. I know I will never get over the space sickness. Bile chokes me for two hours and the ship is finally loaded with passengers and cargo and the mag gravity kicks in and a whole new round of nausea washes over me. Let's go, let's go is all I can think.

The trip, they said, would take two hundred and fifty days and the price you pay for the ticket determines whether or not you get to hibernate. Looks like I'll be awake all the way to Mars.

I'm in a room with three other men; all miners from the look of them. They don't say much until they stow their gear then one tells a story about a kid who got tore to pieces last night in the basement of a tenement row, caught sniffing paint or something and those brassface police are saying it was some other kid who wanted his dope that killed him but the Hillside whores said something else, said he was chewed up by a feral dog and the hoodoo woman who came to sprinkle charms around the pool of blood told the brassface cops that she saw a murder like that before and it was haunts who stowed away on a big cargo transport returning from the copper mines on Mars that did it.

Before the crawlers that built Marina City rolled over their holy places and crushed them all into the dirt the haunts were quiet but now their ghosts are crazy come out of their graves and killing everything in sight or the Marsgods are cutting out their revenge from human skin. The miner couldn't say whether she's right or not but claims he's seen enough shit on this pavement that you can believe it and this thing doesn't seem one bit different.

He falls silent and his chums ponder it mute, nodding and humming until the bosun pipes away the special launch detail and warns all passengers to buckle up for the jump out of Earth orbit.

Two hundred and fifty days on the run to Mars is no picnic. I eat when I have to just to keep from starving but it always makes me sick so I stay in the chaise as much as I can.

I'm sleeping awake most of the time and pulling monsters out of my half awake dreams and laying them out on the pillow beside me like some kid with stuffed animals up against him in the night so I drag myself from the chaise and wander around the dark passageways not awake but not asleep and uncertainty and fear like an old bloodsucking vampire claw at my throat and I can hear a crazy young mother and her infants screaming and wailing their long voices some-

where down the corridor but I get tired of that yelling against those cold steel bulkheads and find myself back in the chaise with images of the red haired goddess with green fire eyes and a sweet cherry kiss mouth in some wide meadow smelling of lilacs and lavender.

The miner they call Crank says he'd been to Mars four times before this and swore the strangest things happen there. One time, he says, one of the colony whores birthed a girlchild on the slab of concrete where the miners parked their gliders. The one-armed earthdaddy was laid out with a pick in his hand and a hole in his chest red and bloody as his newborn baby girl and that earthwhore mother was loving her as much as she could before the brassface police came and took the girlkid from between her breasts on that hard bloodstained concrete slab parking lot, forced the omen back to the alleys and mean street corners of Seekingtown, left the girlkid in the care of a witchomen and forgot her. She was born blind, was the child, so the witchomen made charms and fetchums to hang on her neck and named her Shenandoah but everyone soon began to call her Shannon Doe. When she turned nine the child said she gave a Marsgod the best fetchum the witchomen had made her and in return it gave her its eyes. Crank says he actually met the girl on his last tour. Little bitty thing. She was around nineteen or twenty years alive then.

It seems incredible but I believe him. I've heard other people say things about Mars, like it is a different reality, disconnected from our reality, and I believe things like that can happen.

So Shannon Doe, she is now a red Marsgod with concrete pavement and Mars dust in her bloodskin, wandering Mars cityscapes and blossoming between neon glass and vanishing like smoke on a windy autumn earthday, and they say if you fall asleep up against her you'll wake up some place different, in places you no shit don't ever want to be.

They say she's dark and curvy and when she was a blind girlkid her witchermom kept her inside but now she's all grown up and there's no keeping her inside. Her real mom is long old dead, her body found beaten bloody in a dumpster, died at twenty-seven years with flies on her face and Shannon Doe sees the miners out her window and thinks they are evil for what they did to her earthwhore mother. They are on her tongue and the taste is like fear and loathing and eating her alive.

I wonder, if she is really alive on Mars, this dark and curvy omen, how can I find her and I try to sleep with the image of her in my head but before it shuts down completely, my brain switches the picture to the redhead with amazing green eyes; the one I thought I'd left back there on Earth, the girl I've loved all my life and don't even know why.

The ammonia colored moon is gone. Earth is nothing more than a tiny dot

out there in the inky blackness, just a dot among dots, so far away, and if I can get to the bow of Intrepid, I believe I can see Mars growing in the distance as Intrepid falls toward it at thousands of miles per minute.

The stars seem so low I can feel them on my face, taste them in my throat, day after long day, month after agonizing month. Back on earth the lilacs are in bloom. What's blooming on Mars?

I wake dream a Martian haunt and wonder what if they aren't humanoid, what if they are rocks or pieces of coal or spiny cactus or something, how do we communicate with that? I come up conscious and outside the chaise it is so cold I feel like I am freezing, it feels like I have a fever and my skin aches from it and I see the girl again sprouting like the birth of Venus and I reach out to touch her but her fingers cut me open and I become a one-armed earther laying dead on a concrete slab under a pink lemonade sun with a hole in my chest and brassface police are stealing a bloody blind girlchild baby.

And I feel the earthwhore omen's pain and I am there with her giving birth to a beautiful dark and curvy blind girlchild and loving her in secret after she is taken away and her real momma dies with flies on her face on the dirty garbage streets of Seekingtown.

I roll into a ball under the covers and try to sleep, try to dream of green eyes and red hair, try to imagine what it will be like on Mars, what it would be like to sleep up against the dark and curvy mysterious Shannon Doe.

I liked to kiss the girls with their long hair and sweet smiles when I was in school, liked their skin on mine and the way they smelled like fresh flowers, liked their breath when I leaned in close to kiss them and explore the gardens behind their eyes.

Now all that is just an afterthought, a page torn out and tossed away. After I left school I lived in a shitty little town with rotten luck that turned my dreams into concrete and asphalt like being walked all over by strangers, like the sun burning my eyes and skin, like finding out a Montana cold winter omen ran away with everything I had, and one day I woke up and didn't want to live anymore because I realized people were so selfish that it killed me but I got up and went to work anyhow and smiled at people and laughed with people and it was like bloody shit neverending suicide.

I couldn't go on and I couldn't go back because there was nothing waiting for me in either direction. No person, no love, no home, no treasure, no hope, no future. I forced myself to live those same moments of my life over and over, hanging onto those miseries like they were precious gemstones because that's all I had to connect me to life. My body became a prison for my soul. There seemed to be no truth in anything. Without truth I felt powerless, without truth, my life seemed purposeless.

I felt useless after the icehearted omen Jessie Rose ran away with all my stuff, with everything I managed to get to show I once did something with my shitmiserable life, felt useless and hopeless like some whore sitting in church and thinking that she doesn't belong there and that she's not good enough, that everyone knows what she is and everyone can see it in her eyes and the way she sits and the way she dresses and everyone around her is hoping for a look or a smile or a gesture that proves she has some value as a living creature, but there is nothing.

And that's when I joined the Navy, the best thing I could think to do with myself at the time, but I couldn't get over the space sickness, no gravity and launching from a dead standstill and after one hitch I told them to pack it where the sun didn't shine, I was going to spend the rest of my life with both feet on earth and find Tom Hunter the lost treasure man and begin looking for precious metal again but I never thought it would be on Mars.

What have I done? I'm better than this. I could be somebody. I could be doing something great. I need forgiveness, where is god? It was on the deck next to my boots when I went to sleep but I can't find it now, can't find it, where is god when I need it?

I'm looking for simple answers to my shitdreary life because simple answers make me feel I'm in charge of things. I'm not. It's an illusion. Simple or complex, someone else is usually pulling the strings.

Sometimes surviving tribulation is the worst kind of death. It never ends. It's like freefalling to the end of the cosmos. It never ends.

I lose track of the days and nights and hours and minutes of freefall toward Mars but one night while I walk the decks awake sleeping toward the cubicle that is supposed to be home during the trip, I can feel that the ship is slowing. There is no sound or movement; it is like something in my head, in my ear, or behind my spine. My skin feels suddenly heavy and stretched like it is being drawn toward the bow of the ship and my feet want to stay on the deck where they are.

We're slowing down I say to nothing and no one, and pretty soon the bosun pipes reveille, then a minute later he pipes the orbit docking details to muster at the Number One, Number Twenty-Two and Number Fifty Four cargo elevators. That means low orbit in a few short hours, just about daybreak on the surface of the planet looming in the portwindows.

By the time I get to the cubicle, the lights are on and the miners are already packing their gear so they can catch the first shuttle to the surface. Better hurry, they say. Takes about eight earth hours to unload this crate and you don't want to be on the last shuttle, all the pretty whores will be taken.

Ships as large as Intrepid won't land on the surface of Mars these days because the vortex created under the ship causes huge sandstorms that last for hours,

sometimes days and weeks, and have buried some of the suburban areas of the cities. They could land far from the cities but so much sand is weather blown onto the landing slabs that it would take hours of riding out the sandstorms before they could begin launching the shuttles, so years ago they decided to just do it from low orbit.

On my way to Quarterdeck Number One Hundred-Twelve, I see the FSS Oriskany, CTS 134, idling at the Sixth Gate, receiving shuttles from the surface, one after the other, soon to be freefalling toward Earth. I am almost yearning to be back.

I'm on the second shuttle in a burnsuit with a rebreather over my face and the minute I put my feet on the surface of Mars, I know something is different, like I've been here before, like I know a secret about Mars that is scrunched up in a little pigeonhole in my mind. I feel powerful filled with energy invulnerable for no logical reason at all. I squat at the edge of the concrete slab, suck life from the rebreather and look across the broad, flat desert at a line of dusty distance mountains and, for just a moment, I think I see a figure in a shimmering burnsuit walking toward me.

And so we meet again in the blink of an eye, as if by magic.

I wag my head and the figure is gone, but the image is stuck in there and a dream from the first thoughts I ever had when I was an infant pops into my mind and won't let go until I stand and turn toward the receiving center and find myself looking down at a girl with red hair and neon green eyes, dark and curvy with red cherrykiss lips that could have been on a fashion vidamag. She wears a kind of military jumpsuit, dark green, long-sleeved and tight at the cuffs, the trouser cuffs bloused into flightdeck boots. On her head is a dark green, tight, heavy cloth flight helmet liner, from the back of which flows that long tousled red hair, and pull-down type dark lensed goggles pushed up on top of the helmet, and on her hands tight gloves, also dark green.

I'm a small man at five feet, six inches but she is tiny, five feet nothing even with the deck boots, and looks like a small adult angel child.

I step back, stiffen my neck to see her better when she mindspeaks.

Says hi Richard and I say hi, how do you know me, and she asks don't you know me, and I say I think maybe I do but not sure and right there she smiles a disarming smile and the entire universe slowly rolls over like the film on the surface of a soap bubble and I'm someplace I didn't realize existed, a place that smells like lilacs in bloom.

"You do," she says with her human voice. "You just don't know it yet. But I'll explain it and you'll be mystified."

You talk with a human voice I say and she nods her head a little and tells me I should, too, because everyone talks with their human voice on Mars, no

mindspeak, because the Martians can intercept mindspeak but not voicespeak.

What does that mean Martians I ask and she touches my arm and says yes yes Martians.

Then she says it again, "Yes, yes, Martians. They're all around us. Come with me."

"I can't," I say human and my voice sounds high and screechy like I'm talking through a helium balloon. "I have to meet someone."

"Me," the girl says. "Come with me."

"You?"

"Me. Didn't you guess?"

I didn't guess. "How is it you sounded like Tom Hunter when you called?" I ask, dragging my footlocker behind me as I follow her to a beat-up Hughes Vortex Glider at the edge of the landing slab.

"I sound like who I want to sound like," she says. "But it was Tom Hunter who called."

"Shouldn't I check in with Customs?" I ask and she shakes her head no.

I load the footlocker and sit behind her. "You know my name. What's your name?" I ask.

"Around here," she says soft and easy without looking back, "people call me Shannon Doe."

"Shannon...?"

"...Doe. Some call me Shenandoah."

You that blind girl who got eyes from the Marsgod born from a dead miner daddy and an earthwhore mother on a concrete landing slab, my mind asks before I can think to stop myself.

She says nothing, pulls the goggles down over her spooky eyes, puts the little glider into lift and away we sail in a big spiral until the traffic scanner indicates it is okay to break out of the holding pattern and head for the mountains.

I'm sorry I said that about your mother, it was something I heard on the ship coming out, it doesn't mean I believe it or anything.

She shakes her head. "Nothing I haven't heard a thousand times before," she says. "Don't worry about it. You might as well relax; we have a little ways to go."

"Where?"

"Lands undiscovered and treasures untold."

I'm quiet for about a minute, then I ask why is it she doesn't wear an OBA rebreather or a burnsuit and she tells me she doesn't have to because she was born here, she breaths Mars gases because she is a Martian and she knows places

to go underground to protect herself from solar flares.

A bygod for real Martian!

Yes, yes.

You look human and talk human and act like any human I ever met, how can you be Martian, then I realize if you're born on Mars, even from earthers, you're a Martian, and I wonder if she knows about the haunts and she tells me she does, will I shut up and let her glide the glider.

So I shut up but it doesn't make me feel any better knowing I am sitting behind a red-haired greeneyed Marsgod who looks like an earthhuman omen who knows about the haunts.

The girl I've loved all my life and don't know why scares hell out of me and I get a creepy crawly feeling on the back of my neck.

Turns out a little ways to go is four hundred miles and three hours across an almost featureless land. I stare at it awake sleeping for the first hundred miles, then sleep unconscious oblivious until the glider hums down into a copper red canyon with mile high mountains all around. On the right, in the side of a nearly vertical rock wall, I see a small cave-like opening.

I look at Shannon Doe and wonder at the tragedies from which her life is built. They are etched on her face, those tales of loss and despair, overpowering the few moments of victory and illumination. She looks at me sideways; her neon green eyes tell everything and I wish I could interpret the messages buried there. I am overwhelmed to the verge of tears by feelings of sadness but she smiles and says inside my head that it is not as bad as I think.

But I can feel her loneliness aching in my throat and think she wants to fly away somewhere or sink forever into an empty nothingness or stretch herself like a deer carcass on a hard rusted barbed wire fence for all the world to see.

This is what you did to me is in her head and in her heart but maybe it is just something in me that pities her for the miners' cruelty so many years ago.

We get out of the Vortex Glider, unload our gear and walk to the mine entrance.

She sits and waits and is quiet, saying nothing even when I ask her where is Tom Hunter, only silence and soon her mind grows cold and empty like a bowl of spilled milk running down into the sands of time and space. I imagine that I crawl into the dried deer carcass skin she stretched on the hard wire fence and live out her life for her in the space of thirty seconds. She is quiet awake sleeping pressing face down against her knees and the clay red faraway Martian sungod warms her with its tongue on her skin in the mid-morning, chewing on the gristle of her soul and it kills me to see her so damned miserable because I know I love her and can't help.

Translucent Martian haunts dance around us as we slump at the entrance to the cave, parading ghostly memories of ancient days earthers could never know, faces of loves left or lost along the way, anguish of failures, joy of triumph, of good times before the planet lost its magnetic fields, before all but the heaviest of its atmosphere was blown into the empty cosmos by the solar winds, never to be found again, denying the worthlessness of the present; creatures of an awful darkness stalking the long cold nights peering into human minds dulled from working twelve Martian hours every day in the moldering copper mines and I am so glad I am not them until it hurts me and I weep.

I am moved by waves of feelings, lonely in the harsh shadows that run like fear beside me, darkness in which I am lost but cannot hide. I tremble to share the vision of what I see and hear in the darkness, share with someone, just one someone who might understand the deep, mysterious unuttered screams that rise in my throat like bile and are choked into my guts before I can say them.

Haunts thrust their faces between me and Shannon Doe when I look at her or think to move nearer, to touch her, console her, like they are protecting her from all the evil a human could do.

I've seen life and death beyond the limits of human fear, outside the prison of my soul, free from the arrows of pain. I have breathed life before, the blood of it has run through me hot and furious, the memories of it are caught in the web of my brain, strong and enduring. Its seed has infected me, running through the very essence of all that I see and do in this life. It devours me until I am transformed.

Can you remember when you died and how old you were? Can you remember when you were reborn?

I can.

Doe lifts her head from the cradle of her knees and looks at me. Were you killed or did you die slowly and so carefully that even now you do not know that you died? Ah, wait, I see you walking across a broad red desert dressed in a shimmering burnsuit until you fall, the light of understanding gone from your face, without the tears and laughter that was life, without the pain and beauty of the love you believe you lost.

And it feels like she is writing on the walls of my mind with a great piece of chalk. I can feel the words scratched inside my head like an hour-long rocket burn and I bathe in it a long time and smile softly. And at that moment, in that freedom of half-understanding the meaning of my dream, all I want is to sit in that thought forever and ever and always. I want to plead to the haunts, "Do you mind if I just crash here on your planet forever with Shannon Doe plucking daisy petals and singing she loves me she loves me not?"

I awake suddenly and stand abruptly, striking my head on the roof of the cave. Was I really sleeping? Am I now really awake? Shannon Doe is there at the

entrance talking to Tom Hunter and they are both looking at me and wondering what I have done just now to cry out so in pain.

Nothing I say in my head and they continue to talk. They are discussing wells and water and ancient city and glyphs very old, the way down is long and deep and dark and dangerous and we'll be going first thing in the morning.

I ask where and Tom says lands undiscovered and treasures untold just like Shannon Doe said this morning and I shiver a little like a cold wind just blew across my grave and I want desperately to sleep up against dark and curvy Shannon Doe and wake up somewhere else the sooner the better.

As I stand there looking down at myself I realize with a start my body and mind and soul have been shaped by living too long in the stink of my self imposed cultural suicide back there on Earth. I didn't really have a personality; not one that was my own anyway. The system took care of that the day I was born. No matter what I tried to do, I was going to be a working class grunt.

That is inevitable, really, I knew. But when you are swimming in the mind stuff of the matrix you don't know there is anything else, anything outside; you don't even realize there is an outside. After all, my father, and his father, and so on backwards for generations had been shaped by the system so it isn't surprising their bodies and minds became slaves to it. So what could one miserable grunt hope to do standing alone outside the matrix?

It seemed madness to forsake one's own hopes and dreams and ideals and to accept being told what to do and even what to think by nameless faceless elitists. When I was younger, before I left the Navy, I imagined I could at least look around and make up my own mind about what I thought was going on. So I examined the society in which I found myself and saw everyone had been bred to be dominated by the leaders; bred to believe some people had a sacred right to take anything they had and claim it as their own.

Greedy lawyers and politicians to be specific.

And I thought hey this can't be right, who dreamed up this shit anyway, so the first thing I did was to scratch a few marks on the stairwell walls where I could read them to remind myself and so other people could read them and wonder what the hell it all meant. The signs were good for awhile because one can be lulled to sleep real quick in the matrix; the system is rigged for it.

So the signs were there to keep me alert but it seemed odd sometimes stumbling around the cities awake sleeping and trying to convince myself that what I was doing was the right thing to do. Problem is that no matter how right you believe you are trying to expose the insanity, sooner or later you are going to attract the attention of some very powerful and very angry people who will decide the world will be better off if you are dead.

And so I committed cultural suicide, dropped out and turned off became

invisible homeless jobless nobody living hand to mouth and day to day on the few scraps of change I could scrounge together from the junk I collected from the dumpsters on the wrong side of town. And I would have died in some stinking little filthy fourth floor walk-up if Tom Hunter hadn't called me to Mars to mine precious metal.

Shannon Doe is looking at me sideways with her eyes all squinched up like she is trying to get into my brain to see what is really in there. Nothing you'll be interested in I grumble and she turns away with pouty lips.

But why am I rethinking all this old crap? I forgot all this years ago and, at any rate, I should have left it back there on Earth. Someone, or something, is inside my head making me awake dream my old lost shitty life. I need to get busy collecting artifacts before I go completely nuts. Is Tom Hunter going to keep all this a mystery and spring it on me like a big happy birthday surprise after we get where we are going or what? For a minute I think I am going to fully awaken and find myself in the dirty little hotel room on Earth and all this is only the burnt ashes of my insanity. I wave a hand in front of my face to erase the errant thoughts and try to squeeze some water into my mouth from the bladder on my hip. It tastes old and nasty.

When I fully emerge from the sleep waking dream, the solitude of the Martian cave shocks me alert. I have been so immersed in the atmosphere of the dream, in the influence of it, that only on standing outside of it do I discover its effect on me.

Another world appears before me, an alternate time and space. Everything appears familiar on the surface but behind the dream is a new reality unlike anything I have experienced before.

I can see, in the distance, a child lying upon the burning sands of Mars, a sleeping infant who is dreaming of an adult male walking across the Martian wastelands dressed in a shimmering burnsuit, his OBA rebreather left or lost somewhere along the way. He is near to death.

I lie on my back, sleeping in a dimly lighted room, with my head turned to the left. A cool sheet is beneath me. Faint light enters from an uncurtained window. Far away, walking toward me across a barren, red desert, I dream a male figure dressed in a shimmering uniform. He appears and vanishes like a mirage in the rising thermals, always and ever drawing nearer and nearer. After what seems hours the man is beside me, looming above. He raises his hand to his brow, rolls his eyes skyward and sinks wearily to his knees, falls dead, face down, into the burning sand, the light of understanding drained from his weary countenance.

As he falls, I see that I am the man.

At the same moment, an anomalous cloud bursts from the still figure, whirling and rising above me, then rushes downward, exploding within me silently,

painlessly.

This house has a green roof. It is painted white, chipped and peeling. There is a brick carpark and a sagging garage beneath a broad Catalpa tree behind; tall Maples line the street beside and in front.

The ceilings are high, the windows tall, the wallpaper is stained and faded. There are two stairways; one in the living room foyer and one at the rear entrance. They lead to rooms on the second floor. I know the rooms are there although I have never been on the second floor, have never seen the stairs.

I am in the bedroom of a ten-month old infant boy. He sleeps fitfully on his back, his head turned to the left. He is dreaming of a man walking toward him across the broad, awful Martian desert. He was breach born and dead, this tiny boy; revived after long, anxious minutes.

I have become the child. He and I are one forever, body and soul.

I am the dreamer and the dreamed, dead and reborn.

I will remember the dream all my life but of the events that have occurred before this night I will have no memory until many years later.

All our life energy is only borrowed. Someday we must return it to the Lender.

"When I die," my mother once said, "and if there is an adventure beyond, I am certain I will have no memory of this life, just as I have no memory of the life before this one."

I didn't understand then. Now I understand.

It is July 10, 2025. This planet Earth is at peace, its nations rich and content. The devotions of its inhabitants are not to war but to the exploration of the cosmos and mining the inhabited planets and moons, and it is into this atmosphere that baby Richard Carroll Constable is given a soul to nurture and guard.

Shannon Doe stands before me, her head inclined, slightly aloof, with a look of mild curiosity behind her electric eyes. There will be more, she mindspeaks to me, so much more as the days progress. There will be another dream for you and the minutes and days and hours of your life will be revealed as never before. You will see that you and I have known each other for centuries, sometimes as associates and at other times lovers. Can you remember the life before this one?

I cannot.

You will.

We're obviously not playing by earth rules now.

We never were, never will, as surely as the turning of the planets.

How is it you know these things?

A smile plays petulantly across her cherry-sweet lips. How is it you do not?

Then she is gone, turned away and slipped into the darkest corner of the mine cave and, try as I might, I cannot find her.

"She'll be back," Tom Hunter says, shrugging the rebreather away from his face. "You can take that off if you want. Breathing will be difficult but tolerable. There is an atmosphere coming from below in the mine."

I pull the OBA away from my face and feel a cold rush of fresh air sweeping up from the depths of the dark cavern. It occurs to me to wonder briefly how such a great volume of fresh air can rush upward from beneath the planet.

For the first time in nearly three years, I get a good look at Tom Hunter. He is a brawny man; dark and muscular with a creased, worn face and calloused hands. He has shaved his head since last I saw him and he has gained a few pounds around the middle. I figure he is forty years alive now. He is a little taller than I; five-eight, perhaps. Had we been on Earth Tom would have been wearing Marine fatigues. His burnsuit appears worn and soiled from crawling around in dark caves.

"We'll be going down in the morning," Tom says. "We all need to rest until then for it is a tough descent. Think you're up to it?"

"Sure. I have some experience with these kinds of things."

Tom Hunter cocks his head and clicks his tongue at me. "Believe me, Richard, you haven't. This is like nothing you've ever seen or will ever see again in this life."

And then he tells me what lays beneath our feet. A massive city miles and miles wide and hundreds of layers deep, cisterns of fresh water that still percolate to the surface and pond in some of the craters up here, systems that still produce an atmosphere that is breathable by humans, great buildings and transit systems, tunnels and tubes going in all directions all the way around the planet. No life-forms that we can recognize but some energy fields that seem to convey thought and emotions, undecipherable at the present time but Doe is working on it.

"How did you find her?" I ask.

"She found me, brought me here and asked me to keep it a secret until she could make sense of it."

"Who is she?"

"*What* is she would be a better question. I believe she is a repository for the entire history of the Martian culture from beginning to end. Here, in this place, are all the vibrations of that history. Here, in this place, are all the artifacts preserved that, if properly interpreted, will reveal how and why and when the planet died. One by one she reads them in order and writes the Martians' story."

"No treasures?"

"Not the kinds of treasures you are accustomed to taking," Tom says.

"Why am I here, then?"

"To help us secure and preserve the artifacts from treasure hunters, of

course."

Of course. "How does she interpret the glyphs?" I ask.

"Well, she is a Martian, you see. She grew up out here after she got her eyes. She reads Martian like she was taught it as a first language. I don't question why or how."

I ask him if it is really true that Shannon Doe was born blind and got her eyes from a Marsgod and he says stranger things than that have happened out here but why not ask Doe to get the true story and purses his lips to let me know that is the end of the conversation.

Tom produces a couple of EZ Meals, cracks them open by slapping them against the wall of the mine cave and in a couple of minutes they are steaming hot so we squat against some rocks and eat in silence. I want fresh water. I want a bath. I want clean, fresh clothes. The burnsuit smells of sweat. I think of Marina City, even the squalid suburb of Seekingtown, the warm rooms and the clean baths with hot water and soap and soft towels and clean clothes. It doesn't matter that those rooms are inside plastic domes and the air and water is recycled a thousand times a day. All better than sitting on a cold, hard rock eating an EZ Meal and drinking nasty old water.

The sun will be gone below the horizon in a couple of hours and we will be cold stuffed into our burnsuits with heatsticks laying all around us so we won't freeze in the Martian night.

I wonder what has become of Shannon Doe and Tom says don't worry about it, she'll be back with fresh water before the sun is gone but he doesn't elaborate, doesn't say where she will get the water. I can see the glider outside in the fading light right where she had parked it so I figure she must be bringing the water up from somewhere below the cave.

An image flashes inside my head, a well or fountain with stairs leading downward toward a stone quarry filled with clear, pure, sweet water and children running about laughing and screaming merrily; the memory of the dream returns and I am stunned and perplexed, stuck in an unreal, law-bending fantasy, a parallel universe; an intense, provocative world of loose, entrancing emotions that are spinning, twisting, going and coming. A life before, remembered only as a childhood dream, only as a disjointed vignette having no relation to anything in this life. What does it mean? How can it be? This is now my life, my personal awake sleeping hell in an endless horrifying land on the angry red planet Mars. How did I get here and why? Where am I going and how? I feel a trembling uneasiness inside, an impossible realization that I have been here before in another life and here I died in the past or in the future and was reborn on another Earth in another time.

What in hell does it mean?

A small man or thing approaches, carrying a yoke across his shoulders with hundreds of tiny bottles tied to it dangling and clanking together like wind chimes, each bottle filled or partially filled with colors of liquid; its face smiling a crooked smile of Martian gods long old gone. The little man seems to have been smeared with ochre and rivulets of oily perspiration trickle down, dripping from his elbows. He draws up a grotesque grin, exposing his thick toothless gums.

I shiver involuntarily uncontrollably, not from the coming cold night but from something unimaginable creeping at my feet like a hungry cat. A Martian god lurks in my dreams, in my mind, in my very soul. I long to cry out but cannot. Moaning, echoing cries of unimaginable terror of lost souls violently shimmer across the illuminated universe, driven by some unknown music. This moaning pulsates at every nerve of my body. I cannot help but drive my mind deeper into the inner insanity of my nightmare! I cannot escape! I am just floating deeper and deeper into the vividly detailed vortex.

I can hear fear whispering demented phrases and chanting hypnotic taunts, can feel anger broiling within me, can feel confusion hammering at every inch of my head, screaming in silent horror, "I must leave this chamber of terror! I must escape! Oh, God! You must help me! Help me escape this hell! Save me from this torture and take me to the shores of Heaven. Save me ... ."

Wait! I hear a sound! I hear a voice calling out my name! Who is in this world of mine? No one! Just me, just me and my fears. It must have been a Marsgod calling out my name, for it is calling out again and again saying, You must wake up You must wake up But I am awake you can't fool me I'll ignore this nightmare I must!

Tom Hunter is shaking me violently. Here, he says, put on your rebreather you have fainted from lack of oxygen. My head is pounding and I cannot see Tom's face clearly. Doe is there beside me I'm going to move the glider inside now she says the mapping satellite will be passing over soon and it mustn't be seen Richard can sleep inside where it will be warmer and so will I says Tom Harper and I remember nothing else for what seems only minutes but is hours.

It is dark outside the cave and, although Tom and I are sharing the glider, I can see my frosty breath every time I exhale.

"Where is Doe?" I ask and her hand touches my shoulder from behind.

Here, she says in my mind, are you feeling better and I say I am but I still have a headache. Lack of oxygen says she and Tom wriggles in his sleep trying to find some comfort on the curved chaise.

Try to sleep, Doe whispers softly mindspeak, and I ask where have you been and she tells me she was down in the city beneath the desert to fetch fresh water and she gives me a little and it tastes wonderful like earthwater percolated through a hundred feet of Indiana limestone.

"I was having strange and terrible nightmares," I say, "but it was not like oxygen deprivation; it was something else, like things were driving my dreams, like the Marsgods are trying to eat me alive."

"Perhaps," Doe answers. "They often do that to first time visitors. They like to know what's in there and it isn't always pleasant. Have your dreams continued?"

"They have and they are terrifying. What do they mean? When will it end?"

Doe sighs and slips back into her chaise, into the darkness, and her mind is silent. Presently, she mindspeaks softly from the blackness at the rear of the glider.

What does it mean? It means what it means. You already know how this ends. Every night I empty my heart and every morning it is full again. Crude and inhuman imaginations have become a nexus, keeping me from escaping this nonentity that I have become, that you will soon become. It was sixteen years ago when I gave the Marsgod my little fetchum and it gave me its eyes. I was a human like you! I cried like you; gentle tears streaming down a blushed emotional face; feeling relieved after releasing a silent salty tear. I heard like you, tasted what you've tasted, felt what you've felt and saw what you've seen. Oh, to know such wonders again! To hear the excitement rising in a child's laughter. A face of beauty and a body of purest gold.

For months after the Marsgod gave me sight I pretended to be still blind. I wished I had the courage to tear out my eyes and to commit suicide. I longed for the darkness again, to defeat the real world and to return to the world I had constructed in my mind. The Martian gave more than the ability to simply see colors and shapes; it gave me the power to see the past and the future, mine and yours and everyone else's and it is fearful. I am human no more. I am lost in a spellbinding, endless arena of caged fear. All of my insanity, all of my toils, all of my worst nightmares just stream out in every direction in my mind! I am so weary of sighing; when will the end come, when peace, when respite? You will become as I am; you will become a Marsgod before this is done, Richard. This is your final life as a human. From this form you will become something greater, something immortal and, together, we shall be one entity of purer light.

"But why have they chosen me?" I ask.

"Because you were ready and because you came. You are here," Doe said.

She is silent again and for a long time I wait for her to continue but she does not.

And, so, it comes down to this: We are here to kill you that you may live again.

I sleep wretchedly, dozing and waking until Tom breaks a small heatstick an hour before dawn. When I finally wake the faraway sun is well above the horizon and Doe is already gone. Tom is busy packing his tucker and kit for the decent into the cave and before I can ask Tom says Doe has gone below into the ancient city hours earlier and that we should follow along soon, that I should get

my gear from the footlocker so we can get on with it.

It is clear that a person taller than we three could not descend into the tunnels without a great deal of discomfort. The tunnels are narrow and the ceilings low. Even Tom and I must bend occasionally to pass. Doe, leading the way, often gets far ahead of us, but waits patiently until we join her, guided by her dim lightsticks.

How far, I ask mindspeak and she says miles. Nothing else.

The descent is dangerously steep in places and the walls of the tunnels are so narrow that we have to squeeze sideways or creep on hands and knees and for every inch of the perilous way I can feel the presence of the Martians hovering about us, not hindering but not helping, either. Just observing with a kind of curious silence.

After what seems an hour or more, we find ourselves in a domed chamber perhaps one hundred feet wide and high. Our lightsticks are barely adequate to show its expansive breadth. Great towers and pillars etched with strange glyphs rise from the floor of the tunnel and vanish into misty gloom above our heads. Colorless plants cling to the scorified rocks and embrace the towers. Water flows from fissures and cracks, filling pools and running down the inclines to fall deeply into the dark, confining halls before us.

I've been here before, as a child, in a dream locked away in a tight, forgotten pigeonhole, in the keeping of a small man who held my hand and would not let me venture into the water, the quarry. Children, small and exuberant, jumped and splashed in the water at the far side, swam toward us, clambered out and ran back to jump and splash again. I struggled to work my hand free but could not and the small man thing led me away to a fountain or well, a pit low to the ground built of shaped stones with vines and flowers growing all about brightly lit and murmuring with the burbling sounds only percolating springs can make. Where was it? How could I know of this place when I have never been here before? How could the dream... what is inside my head making my mouth talk my feet walk my hands touch...my eyes see...

Doe scoops up some water in her hand and drinks with great pleasure, inviting Tom and me to do the same. When I remove my rebreather, I find that the cavern is filled with fresh air and plenty of it.

"You'll not need the OBAs from this point on," Doe says, as she begins shedding her clothing, sparse as it is, until she has stripped to her brown beautiful naked nothing, completely unabashed, without embarrassment of any kind, and plunges into a pool with a little cry of delight. Seconds later Tom and I follow.

The water is refreshing and cool, sweet and pure and we languish in it for long minutes until our light sticks begin to dim and grow dull and I worry that we will be stranded in the pool in the darkness, empty and alone.

Doe calms my concern and draws near, touching my cheek in the fading light. Wait, she mindspeaks. Wait for the darkness and see a miracle.

As my eyes grow accustomed to the fading light I see that the walls of the cavern are glowing with a blue, shimmering mercurial luminescence.

"What?" I cry out.

"Glow worms," says Tom. "Very similar to those found in caves on Earth."

"I've never seen these, never on Earth in all the caverns I have explored."

"Perhaps they were there and you didn't see them because your torches were so bright," Doe says close behind me.

I can feel the warmth of her body nearly touching me and my thoughts are diverted from the glow worms to fantasies of her with me in a snowy, downy bed with music and wine. She pushes a fingernail into my back firmly and says mindspeak that she will make that decision then sinks beneath the water and swims away to the far side of the pool.

You are teasing me I say mindspeak.

Not.

Are.

Not.

The pool, I notice, is separate from the cisterns that flow through the cavern and cannot taint the water we drink. We fill our flasks from the clear pools below several waterfalls after we have dried and dressed and scrubbed our teeth, then press onward, led by Doe and the glowing walls which fluoresce for miles and miles ahead of us. It is like walking down a softly lighted street at night after we get accustomed to it.

The unknown and the unfamiliar often wears a dark and sinister mask, and especially so when flitting shades and haunts stir in the labyrinths beneath the ground, creeping and soaring into and from within the cavern walls as we progress ever downward. The vault of the ceiling is higher and grander than any cathedral I have ever seen on Earth, glowing in the neon light of the tiny insects as far upwards as I can see.

"It is three hundred feet or more," Doe says softly. "And you have only seen the smallest part of the passage. A great city lies yonder." She tosses her head toward the tunnel ahead.

"Will the haunts be with us all the way?"

"If you wish it."

"What does that... ?"

But she is gone again into the dim light beyond my sight. Try as I might, I cannot see her although the passage is not entirely dark. I turn back to Tom who is following behind. Tom simply shrugs and smiles ever so slightly.

"She does that more often than I care to think," he says. "First she is here, then she is gone."

"But how does she do it?"

"Hanged if I know. She's more Martian haunt than human, that's for sure." He makes his way past me, leaves me standing alone, shaking my head in bewilderment.

Tom leads the way for several miles and, at length, we two adventurers come to a high precipice overlooking what appears to be dolmens or halfmen scarps, a great expanse of them spreading away before us, interrupted by what seems to be steep clefts and crags of terra cotta scoria, the bases of which are surrounded by deep piles of detrius. But as my eyes grow more accustomed to the vision, I can see that we are standing above an enormous city carved from the living rock. There appear at first sight to be massive stone statues of alien characters mounted upon the walls of the cavern. Doors, windows, vents and entry walks wind everywhere; some even appear to hang in midair. It is a city that, if populated by humans, could house millions.

"This is the city, then?" I ask.

"Not by a long stretch," Tom answers. "This is a kind of suburb. It is called in the Martian tongue, Haribnagai, as close as we are able to pronounce it. The center of the city lies ahead of us another twenty miles."

"Good God, man!" I cry. "Are we going to walk another twenty miles?"

"Not today, we ain't. Tomorrow, maybe, or the next. We'll be making a rest stop here to wait for Doe."

"Where has she got off to?"

"She likes to scout ahead. Doesn't want us to run into any surprises."

My eyebrows go up a fraction of an inch. "What kind of surprises?" I ask, looking around for unexpected creatures.

"Outriders," Doe says from the shadows of a wide crevice a few yards to our right. "The mine owners are trying to make certain that no one can claim any land except themselves. They've hired merks to patrol the outlands to keep people like us from finding anything that might have value."

"Outriders," I say.

"Outriders," she replies. "Thugs, really, yeggs who have no morals or scruples and will kill us before they even know why we are here or what we want, and ask questions later."

"After they've buried us out here where we won't be found for a hundred years," Tom adds.

"What's the point?" I query.

"Point is the mining companies want Mars for themselves and if they buy

enough politicians they'll get it," Tom answers. "Then this city and all the artifacts we've discovered here will be mining company property to sell or give away as they see fit."

"Chances are slim right now that they'll succeed," Doe adds as she slips from the shadows and approaches us. "But next week or next month? Who knows?" She stops only a foot from me and peers intently into my eyes as if lost in a reverie.

"You ever have trouble with the law?" she asks abruptly.

"What kind of trouble?"

"Any."

"I got on their bad list once when I was painting graffiti on walls and stuff. Antigovernment stuff. Anti-system stuff. I was an activist of a sort."

Arrested? she mind quizzes.

No.

Followed?

Not that I know.

"But you stopped painting graffiti?"

I tell her I stopped and never had any more problems but she just cocks her head and smiles a little. "None that you can see from your viewpoint," she says.

"Meaning what?'

"I mindsense some Earthfeds followed you here to see what you are up to."

I look at Tom who is following the conversation with some interest. He shrugs and looks away; gets busy loosening his gear packs.

How do you know this, I ask mindspeak, and Doe says she sensed it from the moment she encountered me on the tarmac at Marina City, that's why she encouraged me to go with her in the glider instead of checking in at Customs, but now she is certain of it, so I am a fugitive and sooner or later the federal men will track me down by examining the records of all the craft that departed from the flight terminal that day.

"Thanks a lot," I say dryly.

"Don't worry. A few men examining hundreds of leads; it will take them awhile to come looking for you out here, especially when they have no satellite photos to look at. And even if they do get to the cave entrance, it will take weeks more or months to find their way down here. The haunts will see to that."

I look around, realize that I have not seen the haunts for several hours. I ask why.

"You forget about them and they forget about you. Besides, they aren't real, Richard. They exist inside your mind. Figments designed to frighten away intruders," Doe explains. "But they will not allow the federal men to pass easily."

It doesn't occur to me to ask how she knows that or how she can state it with such nonchalant certainty, or what the haunts could or might do to hinder the federal men. I am beyond wondering or marveling at her powers, although I am and always will be dumbstruck whenever she vanishes before my very eyes. I want, but think it imprudent, to ask how she manages it so cleverly.

She and Tom are measuring out an encampment and unpacking their gear so I figure they are down for the time being; begin scratching out my own patch, and dimly realize that it is not freezing cold here as it was on the surface. I am fairly sweating by the time I have spread the bedroll. We eat EZ Meals without engaging in speculative conversation and, directly we bathe one at a time in a tiny cistern, apparently constructed specifically for the purpose of bathing—somewhat like a mikvah of Old Earth—we crawl into our pallets.

"Any idea how long we've been down here?" Tom asks.

"Couple of days, I think," I speculate.

"Not even one," Tom answers, then rolls over and is soon snoring peacefully.

Doe, curled into her bedroll, apparently fell asleep the moment her head hit the pillow. I hope I can fall asleep as quickly for I am exhausted. My legs and back ache and my biceps cramp painfully from crawling and clambering through the cavern for hours. Sleep will be purchased with difficulty.

* * * * *

My former Division Officer, Lieutenant Commander John Graf, was not looking at me. His gaze was directed over my right shoulder to the view port behind me where the vastness of the cosmos spread to eternity. Something out there had taken his attention momentarily from his attempt to encourage me to reenlist.

"Ah," he said presently, "I believe that will be your passage to Earth about to dock."

I suppressed an urge to turn and look, blinked twice and remained at ease, thrust out my chin a bit and stiffened my neck for no other reason than to let Lieutenant Commander Graf know that my decision to sign off and return to Earth was final. I was resolute about it, at least in my own mind. Serving in a Space Force that was little more than a Merchant Navy, ferrying passengers and cargo to and from Earth's moon or to shuttles waiting in orbit that would take them and it to Mars and beyond was not my idea of a great vocation, even if I could have tolerated the weightlessness without getting ill, which I couldn't.

Mister Graf curled one side of his mouth and clicked his tongue as he returned his gaze back to me. "Two years is hardly long enough time to get the hang of things." He shuffled the papers on his desk and peered up at me, seeking, perhaps, a chink in my resolve but finding none. "Your Department Head has given you consistently high marks and recommended you for advancement in rating

and for reenlistment. But I understand your difficulty with the weightlessness. Had it myself for the first couple of years. There are medications for it you know."

"I know, sir," I responded. "They don't help and often make things worse."

His gaze was again diverted to the view port as the bosun's pipe alerted crews below that the ship was alongside. I knew everything they were required to do in the next hour. I'd been one of them. But my enlistment had expired two weeks earlier, during which time I had merely been an unwilling civilian tourist waiting in steerage for passage off the Charleston, a mid class Cruiser, to Earth, one hundred thirty-eight thousand miles away.

I could never reason why the government called their ships Destroyers, Cruisers, Battleships or Carriers. No nation on Earth had engaged in a hostile act against another for over one hundred years. Tradition dies slowly, if at all, and particularly is that true of naval and marine traditions. Crewmembers were still called "Sailors" or "bluejackets," and war fighters were still called "Marines" or "jarheads."

Every ship, from the smallest to the grandest, carried a complement of Marines; those assigned to Charleston numbered over one thousand. And all they did was transfer, stow and disperse cargo. In the two years I had served in Charleston I had not seen a weapon of any kind nor had I witnessed any alerts or emergency drills where the Marines were required to muster with arms to defend the ship.

Few Marines, including their Commanding Officers, could display more than one or two ribbons because there were no campaigns anywhere on Earth or in space where anyone could earn a commendation. We, all of us, were Merchant Sailors, like it or not. Turn over of personnel, particularly in the Navy, was over eighty percent; in the Marines it was close to forty percent. That meant that every two years some poor sap had to train three or four thousand new crewmembers just to keep the Charleston in orbit. I could hardly imagine what the deficits would be for a Carrier that normally carried a full complement of ten thousand, including ship's company, the airwings, the Marines, civilian advisors and scientists.

That's why Department Heads and Commanding Officers were keen to keep people like me from signing off and going home. Mister Graf drummed on the desktop with a pencil, snapping me back to the reality of the moment.

"Have you a job offer?" he asked.

"No sir," I replied. "I was self-employed before I signed on and I'll go back to it."

More paper shuffling. The slightest grin played across his lips. He brushed back his graying hair and drummed some more. "Treasure hunter, eh?" he said. "Anything in it?"

"Can be, sir, if you get to a dig in time or discover something buried or lost

before anyone else beats you to it."

"First come, first served."

"Something like that, sir." I disliked calling him sir, particularly since I'd been a civilian for two weeks, but old habits and old traditions, as I say, die slowly in the naval service. Besides, it did no harm since he had intimated that he would recommend me to a future employer with a glowing letter which, in my case, would have been addressed to me.

We talked about treasure hunting for a few minutes, then he folded the service record and stood to peer down at me. He was an inch or two over six feet tall; close to a foot taller than I. He said he regretted losing me, I'd been a good sailor despite my problems with weightlessness, the department had fared well while I was aboard, the docking crews liked me and things probably wouldn't be the same after I had gone. Stuff like that. I heard only bits and pieces; my thoughts were on the hangar deck where the Typhoon Class shuttle was being unloaded and prepared for its return trip to Earth.

I hadn't even one second of thought that my decision to sign off the Charleston and to muster out of the naval service was capricious. The Charleston was a clean, modern ship of the line and the worst that could be said of it was that she was not a particularly good feeder; hardly reason enough to scorn loyalty to her. Although some of my shipmates and officers, including Mister Graf, hinted that my decision bordered on perfidy, on treachery, infidelity and desertion, I was determined not to stay aboard Charleston a minute longer than necessary. I wanted off, the sooner the better. The little Typhoon shuttle was my ticket back to Earth and San Diego. Man, I could hardly wait.

I had to wait for three more weeks. As I languished in the ready room next morning, word came down that it had been discovered, during preflight inspection, the Typhoon had a potentially serious stress crack in the primary tachyon converter and would be returning to Earth empty, with a skeleton crew, using chemical rockets. No cargo or passengers were permitted to be aboard in case other problems developed with the rarely-but sometimes-unreliable and cranky chemical boosters. There were no methods of escape from the small shuttle. I was both furious and disappointed and began to wonder if it was not some kind of cruel game to keep me onboard as punishment for having the audacity to sign off while the Charleston was operating in high orbit around Luna.

Officially, I was a civilian and, as such, I had been assigned a berth in Transient Quarters where all sorts of other refugees, trades persons and immigrants, men, women and children, were berthed awaiting passage either to Earth or to the mining camps of Mars and beyond. A hundred years ago this Transient Quarters was called Steerage; third class accommodations buried deep within the dark corridors of the ship, far from the chow halls, farther still from sick bay, far from

any view port that gave a glimmer of sunlight and so far from Earth that it hurt my heart to think of it.

Fortunately, only young men are foolish enough to sign on to serve in a naval vessel, so only they have such moments of despair, disappointment and displacement; however, because of the resilience of their years, they can weather the storms in which they occasionally find themselves, with all the hope of continuity which knows neither paucity nor introspection.

As a civilian, I was encouraged not to visit my former shipmates lest I infect them with anti-system cursing and ranting. In the Navy, when one is in search of a scapegrace, it is always wisest to point to those who perpetrate the offense which, in my case, was the Navy or, to be more precise, the system under which the Navy operated that resulted in such blatant inconstancy and incompetence.

I quickly sank into a state of hopeless indolence and rebellious discontent.

And, as it turned out, I was at last carried back to Earth in the Charleston itself.

* * * * *

It was the time of the first sun, the first breath of life, the first fall of water from the sky... It was the death of darkness and the birth of light. It was the time of flying as we did in dreams... when we were children.

After what seems only a short time, the sound of scurrying and shuffling stirs me awake. A glance at my chronometer reveals I had been asleep four hours. I raise my head from the pallet to see Doe rolling and tying her gear. Tom is nowhere in sight.

"He asked to go back to Marina City to purchase more supplies; food and clothing and, perhaps, a firearm or two and to find out what the federal men are up to," Doe explains when I ask about him.

"Won't that give them an opportunity to track him from here and back?" I ask, aware that such a perilous decision could only mean she had some cause for concern. "And why do we need firearms?"

"He left when there were no satellites above and he departed from one of the windmills on the surface which is many miles from the cave we entered. He is using a maglev scooter we keep down here for emergencies." She slings her light traveling pack across her shoulders. "And since the feds carry firearms, it might be prudent if we have one or two for self-defense."

"Windmills?" I quiz, squinching up my eyes to regard her with suspicion. "Why has no one mentioned windmills on the surface before this?"

Doe smiles. "Because they don't look like the windmills of Earth. They are venturis with shafts plunging down for several miles. Wind storms on the surface,

some of which can be fierce and prolonged, draw water from deep subaqueous sources for use in the cities and for agriculture, and to drive the machinery of industry. At the same time, the surface air is converted to breathable air by heating soil to extract high content oxygen, and hydrogen for fuel. Those devices are no longer used to produce hydrogen, obviously. These cities, which could house millions of earthers, will be crowded with transients within months if their locations are ever revealed."

"So the haunts will keep them out?"

"For a time," Doe replies. "I imagine the mine owners will think of a way to overcome their influences soon enough."

"What are they, really?" I ask cautiously. "The haunts, I mean. They can't be living creatures; not after all this time."

"Is that your analysis of them?"

"Well, yeah." I begin stowing my gear, rolling and patting everything into a small bundle I can easily carry across my shoulders. "They must be some kind of computer generated images. But what triggers them to appear or vanish, is what I want to know."

Doe grows pensive and turns away. "Later, when we get to the city and you see it for yourself, I'll explain what you are experiencing," she says softly. She stands for a moment gazing wistfully out across the great expanse of the Martian city with the slightest hint of moistness in the corners of her eyes. Presently, she returns to the task of tying her bedroll into a manageable pack.

An updraft of air and a moaning of winds through the venturi shafts signals a storm on the surface. "Tom will have a rough time of it," she says. "I should have dissuaded him from going to the city. The scooter isn't designed to withstand wind and sand storms."

"Oh, it was his idea, then, to go?" I ask.

"We discussed the possibility that the federal men might trace us to a spot somewhere out here," Doe replies, "so he volunteered to snoop around and find out what they're up to."

"It doesn't seem like something Tom Hunter would do. Volunteer to make that trip just to learn what the earthers are doing, I mean. Not when there is all this to explore." I nod my head toward the city and draw down a grim face.

Not like Tom Hunter at all. Curious.

* * * * *

Tom Hunter reached the safety of Marina City the following day, after holing up in one of the windmill shafts until the windsand storm had passed. After he had found a room, bathed and dressed, he took the vintage scooter in for maintenance and caught a taxi into Seekingtown, the section of the city populated by

hard rock miners, prostitutes and swindlers of every persuasion, some of whom had landed on Mars one step ahead of the law. There, in one of the saloon restaurants, he ordered a real meal and a quarter-bottle of Napa Perlot wine, the measure of eight ounces. Later, after a visit to one of the brothels, he would make his way to the landing port. It was there, he knew, that the federal men would begin their traces of all the craft that had departed Marina City without filing a flight plan.

Although the number of unauthorized flights might have been in the hundreds, none were actually illegal since no laws had yet been enacted to prohibit them. The mine owners saw to that. They wanted as many of their people as possible out on the barrens looking for artifacts, mines, roads, wells, ruins or precious metals. Filing flight plans wasted valuable time, valuable effort and valuable company funds.

Nearly everyone was employed by the mine owners, either directly or as vendors, suppliers or support personnel. Even the prostitutes who kept the miners happy were, in their own ways, working for the mining companies.

After he had enquired at the space port, he would go back to Seekingtown to purchase a couple of stun pulsers.

He had made some friends at Customs during his three visits to Mars, and he expected them to return some favors by way of informing him of the whereabouts and progress of the federal men in tracing Doe's flight to the mine.

The answer to his knock on the door was a gruff permission to enter. Across the desk in the narrow office sat a heavy jowled man with a grim face and shaggy brows. At either side of the desk sat men in very clean, very new burnsuits with shoulderpatch logos denoting that they were employed by one of the inscrutable agencies of the Earth government. Each man carried a menacing looking laser pistol on his belt.

The Customs officer scowled at Tom and half rose, then, at a signal from one of the government men, sat heavily and narrowed his eyes gloomily.

"I'll come back," said Tom, reaching behind him for the door.

"No, no," one of the federal men said, holding out his hand to usher Tom to the desk. "We've just this moment been talking about you, Mister Hunter. You should come in and hear what we have to say about your friends."

Tom turned toward the Customs Officer with hands out and questioning eyes. "Compton?" he pleaded. "What's this?"

"Sorry, Tom," Compton replied with a slight shrug. "It is out of my hands. They want to question you... ."

"We'll do this, mister Compton," one of the federal men interrupted. "Do you have a room where mister Hunter can be interrogated?"

"The detention room is down the hall to the right. Third door. No one will bother you there."

With that, the two federal men escorted Tom Hunter toward the detention room, he resisting all the way and muttering low but clear and emphatic curses at his captors. They flung him into a chair, seated themselves on either side and began.

"Do you know where we can find a girl named Shannon Doe?" one asked.

When these two feds first hustled him into the interrrogation room, Tom figured they were looking for Richard, so you can imagine his surprise when they asked about Doe. He didn't know how to answer or even if he should say anything at all.

Tom asked them why they wanted to know and the fed simply asked the question again, a bit more firmly than before. But—how could he say it?—it seemed impossible to get any truth out of them; neither of them would say why they wanted to find Doe.

The youngest of them, a thin and shallow-faced kid with a fluff of powder-blond hair, pulled a grim smile and let Tom know if he didn't tell them where they could find Doe, he was going to spend a few years in a federal prison on the dark side of the moon.

Straightaway the older man took his colleague by the sleeve and, drawing down an angry scowl, out they went into the passageway. Tom couldn't hear them so he spent the time looking for a way to escape. There was none, of course, unless he wanted to smash the dome and kill everyone inside who didn't have a rebreather.

After about ten minutes, the older man opened the door and told Tom he could go. No explanation and no apology. He turned and strode away, leaving the door open. The passage was empty save for the unblinking eyes of the surveillance cameras.

It was too strange and too easy. Tom was certain they would follow him. He must pretend not to think it in case they were mindseeking him, and knew he must find a way to leave Marina City without their knowing.

Tom found his way to a fast hoverbus bound for Old Seekingtown where, he hoped, he would be able to purchase three pulse pistols, a few packets of EZ Meals and some simple medical supplies to mend the cuts and bruises they all had suffered while clambering through the caves. As a caution, he decided to buy himself a new uniform to replace the worn one he had brought with him from Earth. Perhaps, he thought, he might disguise himself a bit, too, and escape detection in case the federal men were following.

The nearer he walked towards the city center the smaller the avenue became. The streets began to lose their box like grid, and became more haphazard

and unplanned. The streets became more and more dense and lively and crowded. The wide straight avenues became squeezed alleyways alive with the buzz of suburban life.

He was in the old section of Seekingtown, the original Martian outpost, and it felt and looked frantic. The scene of urban life before him had probably changed little since the colony was established 25 years earlier.

All kinds of produce and spices and a variety of other merchandise stood waiting for customers in huge sacks in little storefronts. The storefronts were all crowded and squeezed together.

Shallow-faced, pale skinned scrawny laborers carried on their backs and in their arms and on primitive wooden carts all kinds of merchandise back-and-forth from hovercarts to the various markets.

The market he choose was a grimy, dusty, dimly-lighted den of loosely piled boxes and cartons of all sizes and descriptions such as one might find in a milliner's or haberdasher's shop on Earth. The smell of exotic foods combined with decayed coral from some long dead Martian sea lingered in the dreadful air.

He made his way through the aisles of chaos until he found the merchant perched upon a sort of stool which appeared to have been made from the bones of a terran dinosaur. Behind him, in a narrow apartment, the merchant had managed to accumulate for himself a disarray of the kinds of Rattan furniture, from end tables to a single bed, one might expect to find in the Philippine Islands on Earth.

Tom wondered briefly what accident or fancy had collected it all there on Mars.

The pillows and antimacassars were layered with the rust-colored fine dust drawn in through the ventilators and deposited everywhere. Dust motes drifted through the still, heavy air, evidence the filters were not working properly.

Dusty lace curtains, clearly out of place in the hostile Martian colony, were drawn closed over dingy windows.

The merchant was dressed in a remarkably clean and beautiful deep red Moroccan Selham over a hooded white Saharan gandora, and upon his head was a deep blue turban, the loose end of which was draped delicately around his neck and over his left shoulder.

"As-Salamu alaikom, Peace be with you," the merchant said, standing and placing his hand over his heart.

"Wa-Alaikom assalam, Abdullah Barakatu, Peace be with you also, servant of God," Tom responded, touching his breast in the customary manner of the Arabs of Earth.

"How may I be of service?" asked the merchant with a charming smile.

Tom made his order but was disappointed to learn the merchant had no men's uniforms to fit him. He could have chosen a woman's or a child's uniform but they were cut wrong and would have marked him as a strange fellow indeed. Men's clothing so small could only be brought from Earth on the next available ship.

"Might you, then, have a hooded burnoose my size in a plain color, nothing flamboyant, mind you, that I could wear over my uniform?" Tom asked.

The merchant allowed as how he just might have one that could quickly be altered so that it would not drag the ground. He produced a garment that was suitably priced, measured Tom's height and breadth for fit, then vanished down the narrow passage where he spoke briefly to someone in one of the rooms, and returned to ask if Tom cared for anything else.

"Three pulser pistols, if you have them."

"What power?" asked the merchant.

"Stunners."

A minute of rummaging through some cabinets produced three small Dangerfield pulse stunners, each different from the others, and each about the size and shape of a bar of hand soap. The merchant charged the circuits of each to prove they worked and were fully powered, then carefully wrapped them and placed them into a small box.

As they were concluding the transaction, a young woman, her fine eyes and delicate face unveiled, clad in an exquisite salwar qamis, tapped gently upon the frame of the passage to attract the attention of the merchant. She returned the altered burnoose and vanished into the room from which, presently, came the hum of a sewing machine.

The merchant tallied up the fee, making a point of tabbing the three pulsers onto a separate ticket, "To prevent prying eyes from knowing," he said.

Tom paid the fee with gold coins. The merchant's eyes narrowed and the slightest smile appeared on his thin lips. He nodded knowingly.

"To prevent prying eyes from knowing," said Tom grimly.

"I know," the merchant replied. "Would you care to change into your disguise before you leave?" He indicated with an extended arm the way to a dressing room.

When Tom had finished dressing, the merchant accompanied him to the front door, his imposing six-foot frame nearly filling the portal.

He touched his breast reverently and said, "Allahu Akbar min kulli shay."

Tom returned the gesture and, clad in the hooded burnoose and with his packages slung in a bag over his shoulder, stepped into the squalid street. The door closed behind him and Tom heard the unmistakable click of the lock.

'God is greater than everything,' the merchant had said at the parting. It seemed strange, almost prophetic, the Takbir, uttered apropos of nothing at the moment. It seemed almost a portent and a blessing at once, and it left Tom uneasy and alert.

He waited for a hoverbus at the transport station, standing near the boarding platform so he could embark immediately it arrived. Presently a young woman slipped quietly up beside him, standing with her hands clasped behind her, rocking smoothly on the balls of her feet. She smiled when he looked at her, then turned her attention to the direction from which the hoverbus would arrive.

She was small; five feet perhaps, dark hair and brown skin, dressed in garments one would find on someone who more frequented the shops of Marina City than the dark, narrow alleys of Seekingtown.

Tom imagined she was an ally of the federal men assigned to follow and record his movements, report his purchases, his departure from the city and the direction of his flight.

"I have not seen you here before," she said presently, searching his eyes carefully. "Do you come lately from Earth?"

Tom nodded, shrugged a little and murmured, "Yeah, lately." He looked eagerly for the bus.

"Looking for heaven, maybe?" Her voice was soft and had the soft dialect of the American South. "Or the protection of the Lord of the Universe?"

"Only the bus."

"That's good because you can't find heaven here, love," she said. "Perhaps we may never find heaven at all. Or the Lord of the Universe. Or the bus." And she laughed merrily.

"Everyone wants heaven but no one wants to die to get there."

The girl turned to face him and, smiling, extended a tiny hand. "How true. I'm May. You?"

Tom pumped the hand and cocked his head. "Tom," he said. "What did you mean about heaven a second back?"

"I overheard you invoke the name of God at Hassim's shop."

Tom's eyes flashed alarm and he stepped away, looking for an avenue of escape.

"No, no," said May, glancing about. "I'm sent to make certain the federal men do not detain you or follow you." She lifted her chin a bit and pursed her lips, diverting her eyes to an area behind Tom.

"Do not look around, Tom," she said. "Just walk away now quickly. Return to the shop. Knock four times, then two. Hassim will open the door and hide you. The federal men are walking this way. Go now. Go!"

As Tom turned to make his way back to Hassim's shop, he could just barely see four men approaching, clad in glimmer suits so they could not be directly observed. How, he wondered, had May been able to pick them out so clearly?

Everyone thought he was a magician.

But that was in 2024, back in the day as they say nowatimes. Now the old man looked like an oily rag someone had thrown into a pond; he just kind of floated through the world all sloshy and raggedy and older than the scaly serpent itself. No one paid much attention to him. First he was there then he wasn't and hardly anyone cared either way. He was gutter rain and trash blowing across the street. A few noticed but didn't look at him. He was in the corner of your eye, the corner of your mind; he was sneeze or clear your throat or scratch an itch. He happened to the world automatically like he was invisible most of the time and probably that was the way he wanted it. I spotted him twice in the same day almost the same hour all wrinkly and brown dirty mail pouch tobacco barn siding skin, tattered clothes, dull brown eyes, dull brown greasy hair, streaks of gray, dull brown lips that hadn't cracked a smile in a thousand years walking in front of me the same way I was going and his gnarled dull brown hands permanently semi-clenched like dead chicken feet, sculling himself along the sidewalk with a stick he had found somewhere and I wondered where he lived and how he managed to survive in a world that cared little or nothing for homeless things. I recalled someone mentioned they had heard the old man had fallen from the sky and no one bothered him because the brassface police and the street thugs were scared to death of him saying he was immortal and invincible, powerful filled with magic.

Maybe some people are born angry, maybe some are born to torment the cosmos, maybe some people are born mad and never find sanity no matter how hard or how long they try. Maybe some people don't even know they are mad or know but don't care. Maybe everyone is mad a little or a lot. I've often sat up wakesleeping at night wondering if I am mad and thinking the only people who don't wonder are those who are really mad.

I am craving a cup of hot tea and longing for Earth. A hundred years ago, I had a plan for happiness but I let it slip away and I couldn't help but wonder if it was my own fault and that if I had planned better or differently, I might have found the happiness I sought.

But that was a hundred years ago in a different life on a different planet and it seemed pointless to dredge it up and clutter my life with it now but I dredged it up and let it clutter my life as never before. I felt compelled somehow to cling to misery just so I wouldn't forget who I was and what I longed to be some day.

When I was younger I imagined that I was invulnerable and my life was measured in decades, seven or eight at least, or even ten but, as I grew older and wiser—more aged than wizened—I began to realize that my life was measured in

months and weeks until one day I understood that my life and everyone else's had always been measured in minutes and seconds and that death might appear at any moment after birth to cut us down and carry us away.

The cosmic second, my mother used to say.

But if you are careful and clever you can live an entire lifetime in that one cosmic second, and sometimes two or three.

So I began to despair for the years I had wasted on trifles, on meaningless pursuit of worthless goals and love of treasure above the treasure of love. By the time I was old enough to begin to understand the meaning of life, I wondered if it was too late to do anything about it.

Outside the stork-eyed far away red sun absorbs the Martian sky until night falls ice cold black and I am glad I am in the cave city with Doe and I stare at the glow of the heatsticks against the sloped walls of the cavern because I cannot sleep for fear of the returning dreams.

Doe stirs softly and the sound of her breathing is like that of a kitten purring and I want to press against her and close my eyes to sleep again in peace and dream of nothing at all or perhaps only the memory of the sounds of the gentle music of Brahms or Chopin and wake up in a completely different time and space.

Does Doe dream of the vulgar miners eating and drinking and smoking and laughing over the lifeless forms of her father and mother? Does she see them with dark dreaming eyes wishing them dead because she knew they murdered her father and left her mother's mutilated corpse in a trash bin for the flies and the worms?

Does she still wish for the safety of her blind childhood before the Marsgod gave her the vision to see the past, present and future of the cosmos? Dark and curvy Shannon Doe doesn't have time to understand all that she can see because her life, like mine and everyone else's, is measured in mere cosmic seconds.

Pity.

Night blue cold is burning above and snow crystals drift down from the cavern roof to melt and dissolve in the pools of water. Some day ocean waves will thunder over our heads and we'll look up and the sky will fall into our mouths and I briefly wonder if I'll live long enough to see it or ever find my way back to Earth.

The greed that brought me to Mars burns like battery acid on my tongue. Is it real, is this place real, is this time real? I'm not so sure any more and I want to turn off my mind and close my eyes and sleep and wake up some place else because I hate my life and hate what I'm doing and hate that I can't seem to change anything.

Waiting for the bus on the snowdirt evening streets of Evanstown, I closed my eyes and dreaded the appointment with the dentist in a few minutes. My tooth began to ache again when I pushed my tongue against it like it woke up as soon as

I began to think about it and it wanted to remind me how I had neglected it.

It was snowing and the cold just made the aching worse. When will the goddamned bus get here is all I could think.

May waited in the cold for the same bus with snowflakes catching on her dark skin face and her white breath torn from her lips and carried away on the freezing wind and she turned her dark wolf eyes toward me and caught me stealing her beauty and I looked away and shrugged deep into my coat to hide my embarrassment.

Then the bus stopped against the curb and I hurried inside and sat on a cold plastic bench and May followed and took a seat next to me and pressed the curve of her hip against me and in ten seconds I fell in love on a bus taking me to the procaine drill, and her singing wolf eyes danced my heart. In fifteen minutes she was gone but not before telling me her number and I saw her now and then for a year or so until the greed of treasure and the dream of forever in California sunshine took me from her but she promised she would love me until the end of time and I didn't even care because the treasure and the sunshine were more important.

Dark haired California baby doll faced girls were with me in the city frowning wizened old women were with me in the city dark honey soul sparkly eyed girls were with me in the city and it was night and I was sleepwake dreaming about myself and my skin was space colored or the cast of iron and my hands were soft and dark like black sand on a black beach in a black universe.

Cold Montana omen Jessie Rose was yellow in the street light as she watched the red lipstick flow onto the curve of her mirror lips and in the wet color she saw the shape and taste of herself. Her parents always sent her to bed early but every night kept her awake with the sharp sound of their screaming and fighting.

It wasn't about love it wasn't about marriage it was convenience that pulled us together because it was cheaper to live together and it was not so lonely even if we fought a lot we always ended up hot in bed until the sun was in the morning sky and we slept.

I couldn't remember if those long old gone people had names if any other people have names if I have a name watching the pink cherry blossoms under a cold heavy morning sun bowing its head low. I remember pink petal tongue and quiet curling coyote eyes, dark and soft, and I would laugh and lean in close and she'd smile and goddamn she was so beautiful and I don't remember more than her hand on mine her little hand like she'd break like all the voices and bus engines would break her into tiny pieces but later a thousand years all crammed into one night she was still whole still all there and murmuring against my skin and smiling and she felt so soft and her eyes cut me open like ripe fruit like soft flesh like soft boiled eggs and goddamn goddamn she was so beautiful some-

times I couldn't tell where she ended and the rest of the world began.

I'd be as cold and still as the stars and that lovely little girl would give me a little hug and her coyote eyes burned holes through my soul eating me alive and the smell of her skin and her breath was an evil curse from the god of the city and the night wound around her throat and down her spine right on through the streets and parking lots like hot chocolate and the feel of her tongue was on me like soft slow waking in the morning like train whistles waking you up like bus engines waking you up like people talking too loud down the hall like telephone ringing waking you up from sweat and summer blood red sleep and meanwhile back in Evanstown May pretty May brought into the world a baby boychild and she called him Richard but she never told me it was mine and Jessie Rose got greedy and stole all my stuff and ran away with a lowlife piece of shit who murdered her and I forgave her because I loved her and it was just stuff and I can always get more stuff but there was only one Jessie Rose they should have fried that son-of-a-bitch. I did two years of hard time in the Navy just trying to forget and somewhere in the future there would be this one-armed man shot in the chest on a cold concrete slab and a bloody red blind baby girlchild where people spend quick fifty dollar nights in Seekingtown on the too faraway planet Mars.

I'm wasting time thinking about this shit. I'm wasting my life and the lives of everyone else out here and there are only a few seconds left to make decisions before cold cruel death comes to snatch me away to some stinking dark forever nothing gamma ray burst cosmic second.

Cherry blossoms are sailing like antigravity pink snow in Japan back on Earth and I wish I could be there to see those cinnamon candy petals those mother of pearl flowers those plum and orange and tangerine snowflakes covering the ground all around like a shiny soft peach skin fur coat shifting here and there in the Shangri-La winds like waves tossing ticklish against my awake sleepdreaming face.

I think I have lived a thousand unlearned and unexamined lives of passion and grief and joy I think that I am as old as Adam as old as that ancient scaly serpent of evil fame who grins sadly and tricks me with his contrives. I think Doe learned a host of things while she was blind while she was confined in her darkness while she was a sister of the stars prisoner I never saw such peace on any face in life or in death and the slow rise and fall of her bosom runs on the endless treadmill of my mind a soft fuzzy puppy asleep beside me a thousand miles away and my hands are just empty cups to hold bitter wine.

The tiny bird glows yellow in the bottom of its cage its black glistening eye looks at me unblinking it lays its head against the bars of its prison and dies before I can say goodbye and I cry for hours in the darkness. It never learned to fly and it kills me that I couldn't teach it.

God seems too remote for me to find where do the birds go when they die god where do the kittens go where do the dogs go where do the horses go and where do all the people go god when they die? My thoughts are a narrow stone street plunging downhill to fall into a sea of red winds and a boiling cauldron beneath stars wrecked by a million centuries of cosmic seconds until I am drained away drained away drained drained drained.

When I was four my mother went to work on an assembly line at an auto company and I used to walk six blocks to wait for her bus in the afternoon so I could take her home because I was afraid she would loose her way. Foolish little boy your mother builds automobiles how can she lose her way but she made me stop because she was afraid something awful might happen while I was waiting at the bus stop and sure enough when I was eighteen something awful happened at the bus stop while I was waiting to go see a dentist. How did she know? The last words she said to me her last telephone words were I love you Richard I'll see you over there and I knew she meant *over there* on the other side. How does she know?

Go to sleepy little baby, go to sleepy little baby, when you wake we'll patty patty cake and ride a shiny little po-oh-nee.

She lay her weary head upon that soft sanitized hospital pillow and went to sleep before I could say goodbye went to the other side before I could ask directions crossed the river of forgetfulness before I could hurry to her side to touch her cold blue hand and she was only forty-one years alive and I've had a nonverbal standoff relationship with god ever since.

I cried for three years in the darkness and then the words on the walls the graffiti on the walls the chalk powder words on the boxcars the painted sidewalk words became my tears while I was not associated with the human race when my humanity had run out of me like melting ice like I was barbed wire and asphalt and gutter rain like I was street lamp burning dog teeth ripped out skin and bone when I was so afraid I didn't sleep for days because I'd dream I was picking through trash and all I could find was her hair.

The ochre man waddles up to me and peers at me with his bottles clanking and banging together on the yoke across his shoulders and cloudy salty eyes shakes his head says maybe he'll be okay maybe he'll live after all maybe you can go home in a day or two and my mother is pressing her face into her pillow and crying I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places I'll never smile again the last time I saw Paris children laughing and splashing in the old stone quarry but I can't go in I think I am too young I think I don't know how to swim and the water in the quarry is blood red gushing I am terrified and the ochre man is waving his arms and running people here and there something is wrong it is a mistake no one can mend and I am sleeping on a bed of nails with one foot in the fire.

"They are going to poison the wells," someone says in the back of my mind.

"They can't!"

"Oh, yes, they will."

Is that you, Richard? someone mindspeaks to me.

"I think he is finally asleep," says Doe.

Is that you, Richard?

"Let him sleep," says Tom and I awaken abruptly, exploding into myself bewildered and disoriented.

I roll onto my side and see Doe and Tom with a girl. They are helping Tom with his packages and casting furtive glances at me.

Who asks, I mindspeak.

May.

Then I am running out of myself, groping for a handhold to steady myself as I lurch into a standing position.

May? Suddenly I am all old cold night air and sun bleached bones and speechless and ashamed because I know that voice I know that song I know that sadness.

May?

Tom and Doe walk away to where the scooter is parked and they are talking about the wells being poisoned by the mining companies to keep colonists from settling here.

May? She approaches and she is smiling and I hold out my arms and she falls into me and I kiss her red red mouth and it dances with mine like a long lost friend and I feel that my heart is going to explode.

May.

Richard.

There was a boychild?

On Earth with my mother.

How old?

Five.

Does he know of me?

Yes. I've told him you are a wonderful man and a good and loving father and that you are away but will return soon and that you will take him to the ballgames and fishing and treasure hunting. He likes the idea of treasure hunting most of all.

May. I'm sorry.

I do not need to hear it but thank you.

How did you find me?

I've searched for you since the boy was born, since five years ago. Really, now, we need to think of what we shall do to stop the mining companies from

poisoning the wells.

"But how?" I ask.

Tom and Doe come closer cautiously, not wanting to intrude upon our mindspeak reunion.

"There are several hundred vigilantes gathering in Seekingtown at this moment," Tom says, reaching into his bag and producing a pulse stunner. "They are going to lure the mine owners and the government men into an ambush at the Copper Canyons in a day or two, when they are assembled and have their plans well thought out. Then they will capture as many as they need not kill and demand that the mine owners abandon their plans to poison the wells or get off the planet."

"It will mean war," I say, drawing down a grim face. "The government will drop ten thousand Marines onto the surface and everyone will die in a single afternoon."

"The warfighters will take our side when they hear what... ."

"You won't live long enough to tell them."

"But we are broadcasting on all frequencies," says Doe. "Every ship between here and Earth can hear our pleas."

I shake my head and slump against the wall. "You don't understand. The Communications Officers will be instructed to block all incoming messages. The Marines, the sailors, will only hear that bands of insane colonists are murdering innocent people. The ships will go into orbit above the Copper Canyons and begin killing people with laser cannons, then the Marines will jump down and mop up those who manage to survive. In a day, two at most, everyone involved in this plot will be dead."

Doe looks stricken and turns away. Tom stiffens his neck and chews his lips. May lets go my hand and looks at me anxiously. "But we must do something. If they succeed in poisoning the wells, no colonists can live here for decades and those who are here, who live out here away from the distilling plants, will die. We just can't allow it," she says firmly

"Wouldn't it be easier and a lot less destructive to simply limit the number of colonists who are allowed to come to Mars?" I ask. "There must be something else going on here. It makes no sense to poison the water everyone spent so many years and fortunes finding."

"How can you fathom the thinking of the mine owners?" Doe asks. "They want the planet to themselves and if they have to poison the wells and kill several thousand colonists to get it, I think they won't hesitate."

Tom comes up to me and places a beefy hand on my shoulder. "Richard, I heard the whole story on the way back with May and I believe her. We have to do what we can to stop the mine owners. Will you help?"

I don't believe the mine owners are going to poison the water it is insane it is a lie and something else is happening here. I step back and wave my hands before my eyes as if to erase those three things standing before me who are they what are they why are they here what am I doing?

It makes no sense I say and they bob their heads up and down ya ya poison the wells smiling like freaks at a sideshow how can I know if they are telling the truth or lying? I am ivory tusks and elephant bones an empty skin stretched over a baobab tree I am empty I am mindless my thoughts have been stolen and I can feel myself sliding down inside my head like rain smears on a dusty window like words on a broken mirror.

The ochre man returns gliding through the cavern like a vampire bat and is gone leaving his clanking bottles smashed and running red blood red all over the floor why am I here? Must I go and die at twenty-nine to prove my love for you must you die to prove your love for me old exhausted angry men spraying death at the enemy nameless faceless sons of earth kill and die tears and sweat, swearing at the sky and cursing god I can't remember if you have a name I can't remember if you are dead or alive I've never seen the baby boykid back there on earth and I don't want to kill and I don't want to die because I just learned to live five minutes ago don't ask again I have no answer I have not learned to speak or dream I have not learned to laugh I have not learned to fly I have not learned to run from the noise and swift fearful city streets it is cold I am cold I am hungry so hungry can't you feel this hunger it makes me a ghost how can you lie to me like this?

A hand omnipotent in endless space, from chaos forms a world and finds a place where, through countless ages yet unborn, through numberless cosmic seconds, a star might shine from dusk to dawn.

Great mountains rise, majestic in their might, and sun-filled mountains aglow with mellow light and rippling streams go purling through the darkened forests to silver lakes that glisten in the shadows.

Jessie Rose turns on the light and slips from bed and goes into the kitchen to make a cup of tea and sits in the darkness drinking her tea then goes outside to stare up at the black night faraway stars or stray dogs or wandering cats with nothing but the quiet to keep her company and I press my face against her pillow and try to go back to sleep but I can't because all I can do is wonder what is she doing out there and I wait for her to come back and she always says she is listening to something or someone in the sky she can't say what it is and I say aliens and when she laughs her old bricks voice is like the purring of an ancient cat and she slips into bed and turns away from me and I press against the hot curve of her back and before I fall asleep she asks how are we going to pay the rent she loves her four-fingered alien baby she says but it cries too much and it never blinks shut up I say and I sleep until she turns on the light and slips out of bed again when

the lights go on again all over the world child of god bright starlight antigravity cosmic second heart of darkness alien child.

We gather there upon the broad plain above the Copper Canyons and wait for the mine owners and the marines and the merks and the federal men in their glimmer burnsuits but they never come. Two days we stay until we are old tired hungry and our rebreathers are exhausted and we are dying of freezing cold and radiation but they never come so we all return to Marina City or Seekingtown or the mines and the caves and the ruins and when we four arrive at the ancient city we find a dozen merks waiting for us. Only because Doe can mindseek them are we able to avoid being killed. She leads us around the ambush and we catch three of them off guard and stun them witless and tie them to a dolmen with gags over their mouths.

They leave me to guard the three and venture off to find more.

Doe calls up the haunts and they swirl from the cavern walls and crevices first by the dozens and then by hundreds and then by tens of thousands. How can this be? Where have all these creatures come from? Tenuous wraiths trailing bright tails of shimmering fire their eyes as black as the blackest night like they are a thousand miles deep like they are universes wide and the merks are caught by surprise and scream in terror as the haunts the Marsgods fall upon them and rend them limb from limb I think I am going to puke and I am holding the stunner on the man named Kennedy and he is struggling in terror to free himself struggling to crawl away from the haunts and he kicks at me trying to knock the stunner from my hand and I reach behind me to get his lasepistol and as I turn something heavy and large smashes into the side of my face and I am thrown sideways and I see a man's boots walk up beside my head and out of the corner of my eye I can see he is pointing his lasepistol directly at my head.

I am outside in the desert. I don't know how I got here; I must have lost consciousness for a while. I walk toward the low plain before me and I think I can see an infant lying on the sand, a boy, his head turned toward me, watching intently as I approach. I think I am dreaming, I cannot be here without my rebreather, the infant cannot be here without a rebreather and why is an infant here in the first place?

As I approach the infant I know that I am losing consciousness; I am dying, the clock is ticking, time is running out and the poker is in the fire. My cosmic second has ended and I fall to my knees and just before I collapse upon the red cold sands of Mars I can see that the infant is me and the last thing I hear, the last words the ochre man is saying is thank god missus Constable it was touch and go there for a while but the boy will survive.

Behold, I show you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.

THE COMING OF THE ICE

It is strange to be alone, and so cold. To be the last man on earth....

The snow drives silently about me, ceaselessly, drearily. And I am isolated in this tiny white, indistinguishable corner of a blurred world, surely the loneliest creature in the universe. How many thousands of years is it since I last knew the true companionship? For a long time I have been lonely, but there were people, creatures of flesh and blood. Now they are gone. Now I have not even the stars to keep me company, for they are all lost in an infinity of snow and twilight here below.

If only I could know how long it has been since first I was imprisoned upon the earth. It cannot matter now. And yet some vague dissatisfaction, some faint instinct, asks over and over in my throbbing ears: What year? What year?

It was in the year 1930 that the great thing began in my life. There was then a very great man who performed operations on his fellows to compose their vitals—we called such men surgeons. John Granden wore the title "Sir" before his name, in indication of nobility by birth according to the prevailing standards in England. But surgery was only a hobby of Sir John's, if I must be precise, for, while he had achieved an enormous reputation as a surgeon, he always felt that his real work lay in the experimental end of his profession. He was, in a way, a dreamer, but a dreamer who could make his dreams come true.

I was a very close friend of Sir John's. In fact, we shared the same apartments in London. I have never forgotten that day when he first mentioned to me his momentous discovery. I had just come in from a long sleigh-ride in the country with Alice, and I was seated drowsily in the window-seat, writing idly in my mind a description of the wind and the snow and the grey twilight of the evening. It is strange, is it not, that my tale should begin and end with the snow and the twilight.

Sir John opened suddenly a door at one end of the room and came hurrying across to another door. He looked at me, grinning rather like a triumphant ma-

niac.

"It's coming!" he cried, without pausing, "I've almost got it!" I smiled at him: he looked very ludicrous at that moment.

"What have you got?" I asked.

"Good Lord, man, the Secret—the Secret!" And then he was gone again, the door closing upon his victorious cry, "The Secret!"

I was, of course, amused. But I was also very much interested. I knew Sir John well enough to realize that, however amazing his appearance might be, there would be nothing absurd about his "Secret"—whatever it was. But it was useless to speculate. I could only hope for enlightenment at dinner. So I immersed myself in one of the surgeon's volumes from his fine Library of Imagination, and waited.

I think the book was one of Mr. H. G. Wells', probably "The Sleeper Awakes," or some other of his brilliant fantasies and predictions, for I was in a mood conducive to belief in almost anything when, later, we sat down together across the table. I only wish I could give some idea of the atmosphere that permeated our apartments, the reality it lent to whatever was vast and amazing and strange. You could then, whoever you are, understand a little the ease with which I accepted Sir John's new discovery.

He began to explain it to me at once, as though he could keep it to himself no longer.

"Did you think I had gone mad, Dennell?" he asked. "I quite wonder that I haven't. Why, I have been studying for many years—for most of my life—on this problem. And, suddenly, I have solved it! Or, rather, I am afraid I have solved another one much greater."

"Tell me about it, but for God's sake don't be technical."

"Right," he said. Then he paused. "Dennell, it's magnificent! It will change everything that is in the world." His eyes held mine suddenly with the fatality of a hypnotist's. "Dennell, it is the Secret of Eternal Life," he said.

"Good Lord, Sir John!" I cried, half inclined to laugh.

"I mean it," he said. "You know I have spent most of my life studying the processes of birth, trying to find out precisely what went on in the whole history of conception."

"You have found out?"

"No, that is just what amuses me. I have discovered something else without knowing yet what causes either process.

"I don't want to be technical, and I know very little of what actually takes place myself. But I can try to give you some idea of it."

It is thousands, perhaps millions of years since Sir John explained to me. What little I understood at the time I may have forgotten, yet I try to reproduce

what I can of his theory.

"In my study of the processes of birth," he began, "I discovered the rudiments of an action which takes place in the bodies of both men and women. There are certain properties in the foods we eat that remain in the body for the reproduction of life, two distinct Essences, so to speak, of which one is retained by the woman, another by the man. It is the union of these two properties that, of course, creates the child.

"Now, I made a slight mistake one day in experimenting with a guinea-pig, and I re-arranged certain organs which I need not describe so that I thought I had completely messed up the poor creature's abdomen. It lived, however, and I laid it aside. It was some years later that I happened to notice it again. It had not given birth to any young, but I was amazed to note that it had apparently grown no older: it seemed precisely in the same state of growth in which I had left it.

"From that I built up. I re-examined the guinea-pig, and observed it carefully. I need not detail my studies. But in the end I found that my 'mistake' had in reality been a momentous discovery. I found that I had only to close certain organs, to re-arrange certain ducts, and to open certain dormant organs, and, mirabile dictu, the whole process of reproduction was changed.

"You have heard, of course, that our bodies are continually changing, hour by hour, minute by minute, so that every few years we have been literally reborn. Some such principle as this seems to operate in reproduction, except that, instead of the old body being replaced by the new, and in its form, approximately, the new body is created apart from it. It is the creation of children that causes us to die, it would seem, because if this activity is, so to speak, dammed up or turned aside into new channels, the reproduction operates on the old body, renewing it continually. It is very obscure and very absurd, is it not? But the most absurd part of it is that it is true. Whatever the true explanation may be, the fact remains that the operation can be done, that it actually prolongs life indefinitely, and that I alone know the secret."

Sir John told me a very great deal more, but, after all, I think it amounted to little more than this. It would be impossible for me to express the great hold his discovery took upon my mind the moment he recounted it. From the very first, under the spell of his personality, I believed, and I knew he was speaking the truth. And it opened up before me new vistas. I began to see myself become suddenly eternal, never again to know the fear of death. I could see myself storing up, century after century, an amplitude of wisdom and experience that would make me truly a god.

"Sir John!" I cried, long before he was finished. "You must perform that operation on me!"

"But, Dennell, you are too hasty. You must not put yourself so rashly into my

hands.''

''You have perfected the operation, haven't you?''

''That is true,'' he said.

''You must try it out on somebody, must you not?''

''Yes, of course. And yet—somehow, Dennell, I am afraid. I cannot help feeling that man is not yet prepared for such a vast thing. There are sacrifices. One must give up love and all sensual pleasure. This operation not only takes away the mere fact of reproduction, but it deprives one of all the things that go with sex, all love, all sense of beauty, all feeling for poetry and the arts. It leaves only the few emotions, selfish emotions, that are necessary to self-preservation. Do you not see? One becomes an intellect, nothing more—a cold apotheosis of reason. And I, for one, cannot face such a thing calmly.''

''But, Sir John, like many fears, it is largely horrible in the foresight. After you have changed your nature you cannot regret it. What you are would be as horrible an idea to you afterwards as the thought of what you will be seems now.''

''True, true. I know it. But it is hard to face, nevertheless.''

''I am not afraid to face it.''

''You do not understand it, Dennell, I am afraid. And I wonder whether you or I or any of us on this earth are ready for such a step. After all, to make a race deathless, one should be sure it is a perfect race.''

''Sir John,'' I said, ''it is not you who have to face this, nor any one else in the world till you are ready. But I am firmly resolved, and I demand it of you as my friend.''

Well, we argued much further, but in the end I won. Sir John promised to perform the operation three days later.

... But do you perceive now what I had forgotten during all that discussion, the one thing I had thought I could never forget so long as I lived, not even for an instant? It was my love for Alice—I had forgotten that!

I cannot write here all the infinity of emotions I experienced later, when, with Alice in my arms, it suddenly came upon me what I had done. Ages ago—I have forgotten how to feel. I could name now a thousand feelings I used to have, but I can no longer even understand them. For only the heart can understand the heart, and the intellect only the intellect.

With Alice in my arms, I told the whole story. It was she who, with her quick instinct, grasped what I had never noticed.

''But Carl!'' she cried, ''Don't you see?—It will mean that we can never be married!'' And, for the first time, I understood. If only I could re-capture some conception of that love! I have always known, since the last shred of comprehension slipped from me, that I lost something very wonderful when I lost love. But

what does it matter? I lost Alice too, and I could not have known love again without her.

We were very sad and very tragic that night. For hours and hours we argued the question over. But I felt somewhat that I was inextricably caught in my fate, that I could not retreat now from my resolve. I was perhaps, very schoolboyish, but I felt that it would be cowardice to back out now. But it was Alice again who perceived a final aspect of the matter.

"Carl," she said to me, her lips very close to mine, "it need not come between our love. After all, ours would be a poor sort of love if it were not more of the mind than of the flesh. We shall remain lovers, but we shall forget mere carnal desire. I shall submit to that operation too!"

And I could not shake her from her resolve. I would speak of danger that I could not let her face. But, after the fashion of women, she disarmed me with the accusation that I did not love her, that I did not want her love, that I was trying to escape from love. What answer had I for that, but that I loved her and would do anything in the world not to lose her?

I have wondered sometimes since whether we might have known the love of the mind. Is love something entirely of the flesh, something created by an ironic God merely to propagate His race? Or can there be love without emotion, love without passion—love between two cold intellects? I do not know. I did not ask then. I accepted anything that would make our way more easy.

There is no need to draw out the tale. Already my hand wavers, and my time grows short. Soon there will be no more of me, no more of my tale—no more of Mankind. There will be only the snow, and the ice, and the cold ...

Three days later I entered John's Hospital with Alice on my arm. All my affairs—and they were few enough—were in order. I had insisted that Alice wait until I had come safely through the operation, before she submitted to it. I had been carefully starved for two days, and I was lost in an unreal world of white walls and white clothes and white lights, drunk with my dreams of the future. When I was wheeled into the operating room on the long, hard table, for a moment it shone with brilliant distinctness, a neat, methodical white chamber, tall and more or less circular. Then I was beneath the glare of soft white lights, and the room faded into a misty vagueness from which little steel rays flashed and quivered from silvery cold instruments. For a moment our hands, Sir John's and mine, gripped, and we were saying good-bye—for a little while—in the way men say these things. Then I felt the warm touch of Alice's lips upon mine, and I felt sudden painful things I cannot describe, that I could not have described then. For a moment I felt that I must rise and cry out that I could not do it. But the feeling passed, and I was passive.

Something was pressed about my mouth and nose, something with an ethe-

real smell. Staring eyes swam about me from behind their white masks. I struggled instinctively, but in vain—I was held securely. Infinitesimal points of light began to wave back and forth on a pitch-black background; a great hollow buzzing echoed in my head. My head seemed suddenly to have become all throat, a great, cavernous, empty throat in which sounds and lights were mingled together, in a swift rhythm, approaching, receding eternally. Then, I think, there were dreams. But I have forgotten them....

I began to emerge from the effect of the ether. Everything was dim, but I could perceive Alice beside me, and Sir John.

"Bravely done!" Sir John was saying, and Alice, too, was saying something, but I cannot remember what. For a long while we talked, I speaking the nonsense of those who are coming out from under ether, they teasing me a little solemnly. But after a little while I became aware of the fact that they were about to leave. Suddenly, God knows why, I knew that they must not leave. Something cried in the back of my head that they must stay—one cannot explain these things, except by after events. I began to press them to remain, but they smiled and said they must get their dinner. I commanded them not to go; but they spoke kindly and said they would be back before long. I think I even wept a little, like a child, but Sir John said something to the nurse, who began to reason with me firmly, and then they were gone, and somehow I was asleep....

When I awoke again, my head was fairly clear, but there was an abominable reek of ether all about me. The moment I opened my eyes, I felt that something had happened. I asked for Sir John and for Alice. I saw a swift, curious look that I could not interpret come over the face of the nurse, then she was calm again, her countenance impassive. She reassured me in quick meaningless phrases, and told me to sleep. But I could not sleep: I was absolutely sure that something had happened to them, to my friend and to the woman I loved. Yet all my insistence profited me nothing, for the nurses were a silent lot. Finally, I think, they must have given me a sleeping potion of some sort, for I fell asleep again.

For two endless, chaotic days, I saw nothing of either of them, Alice or Sir John. I became more and more agitated, the nurse more and more taciturn. She would only say that they had gone away for a day or two.

And then, on the third day, I found out. They thought I was asleep. The night nurse had just come in to relieve the other.

"Has he been asking about them again?" she asked.

"Yes, poor fellow. I have hardly managed to keep him quiet."

"We will have to keep it from him until he is recovered fully." There was a long pause, and I could hardly control my labored breathing.

"How sudden it was!" one of them said. "To be killed like that—" I heard no more, for I leapt suddenly up in bed, crying out.

"Quick! For God's sake, tell me what has happened!" I jumped to the floor and seized one of them by the collar. She was horrified. I shook her with a superhuman strength.

"Tell me!" I shouted, "Tell me—Or I'll—!" She told me—what else could she do.

"They were killed in an accident," she gasped, "in a taxi—a collision—the Strand—!" And at that moment a crowd of nurses and attendants arrived, called by the other frantic woman, and they put me to bed again.

I have no memory of the next few days. I was in delirium, and I was never told what I said during my ravings. Nor can I express the feelings I was saturated with when at last I regained my mind again. Between my old emotions and any attempt to put them into words, or even to remember them, lies always that insurmountable wall of my Change. I cannot understand what I must have felt, I cannot express it.

I only know that for weeks I was sunk in a misery beyond any misery I had ever imagined before. The only two friends I had on earth were gone to me. I was left alone. And, for the first time, I began to see before me all these endless years that would be the same, dull, lonely.

Yet I recovered. I could feel each day the growth of a strange new vigor in my limbs, a vast force that was something tangibly expressive to eternal life. Slowly my anguish began to die. After a week more, I began to understand how my emotions were leaving me, how love and beauty and everything of which poetry was made—how all this was going. I could not bear the thought at first. I would look at the golden sunlight and the blue shadow of the wind, and I would say,

"God! How beautiful!" And the words would echo meaninglessly in my ears. Or I would remember Alice's face, that face I had once loved so inextinguishably, and I would weep and clutch my forehead, and clench my fists, crying,

"O God, how can I live without her!" Yet there would be a little strange fancy in my head at the same moment, saying,

"Who is this Alice? You know no such person." And truly I would wonder whether she had ever existed.

So, slowly, the old emotions were shed away from me, and I began to joy in a corresponding growth of my mental perceptions. I began to toy idly with mathematical formulae I had forgotten years ago, in the same fashion that a poet toys with a word and its shades of meaning. I would look at everything with new, seeing eyes, new perception, and I would understand things I had never understood before, because formerly my emotions had always occupied me more than my thoughts.

And so the weeks went by, until, one day, I was well.

... What, after all, is the use of this chronicle? Surely there will never be men

to read it. I have heard them say that the snow will never go. I will be buried, it will be buried with me; and it will be the end of us both. Yet, somehow, it eases my weary soul a little to write....

Need I say that I lived, thereafter, many thousands of thousands of years, until this day? I cannot detail that life. It is a long round of new, fantastic impressions, coming dream-like, one after another, melting into each other. In looking back, as in looking back upon dreams, I seem to recall only a few isolated periods clearly; and it seems that my imagination must have filled in the swift movement between episodes. I think now, of necessity, in terms of centuries and millenniums, rather than days and months.... The snow blows terribly about my little fire, and I know it will soon gather courage to quench us both ...

Years passed, at first with a sort of clear wonder. I watched things that took place everywhere in the world. I studied. The other students were much amazed to see me, a man of thirty odd, coming back to college.

"But Judas, Dennell, you've already got your Ph.D! What more do you want?" So they would all ask me. And I would reply;

"I want an M.D. and an F.R.C.S." I didn't tell them that I wanted degrees in Law, too, and in Biology and Chemistry, in Architecture and Engineering, in Psychology and Philosophy. Even so, I believe they thought me mad. But poor fools! I would think. They can hardly realize that I have all of eternity before me to study.

I went to school for many decades. I would pass from University to University, leisurely gathering all the fruits of every subject I took up, revelling in study as no student revelled ever before. There was no need of hurry in my life, no fear of death too soon. There was a magnificence of vigor in my body, and a magnificence of vision and clarity in my brain. I felt myself a super-man. I had only to go on storing up wisdom until the day should come when all knowledge of the world was mine, and then I could command the world. I had no need for hurry. O vast life! How I gloried in my eternity! And how little good it has ever done me, by the irony of God.

For several centuries, changing my name and passing from place to place, I continued my studies. I had no consciousness of monotony, for, to the intellect, monotony cannot exist: it was one of those emotions I had left behind. One day, however, in the year 2132, a great discovery was made by a man called Zarentzov. It had to do with the curvature of space, quite changing the conceptions that we had all followed since Einstein. I had long ago mastered the last detail of Einstein's theory, as had, in time, the rest of the world. I threw myself immediately into the study of this new, epoch-making conception.

To my amazement, it all seemed to me curiously dim and elusive. I could not quite grasp what Zarentzov was trying to formulate.

"Why," I cried, "the thing is a monstrous fraud!" I went to the professor of

Physics in the University I then attended, and I told him it was a fraud, a huge book of mere nonsense. He looked at me rather pityingly.

"I am afraid, Modevski," he said, addressing me by the name I was at the time using, "I am afraid you do not understand it, that is all. When your mind has broadened, you will. You should apply yourself more carefully to your Physics." But that angered me, for I had mastered my Physics before he was ever born. I challenged him to explain the theory. And he did! He put it, obviously, in the clearest language he could. Yet I understood nothing. I stared at him dumbly, until he shook his head impatiently, saying that it was useless, that if I could not grasp it I would simply have to keep on studying. I was stunned. I wandered away in a daze.

For do you see what happened? During all those years I had studied ceaselessly, and my mind had been clear and quick as the day I first had left the hospital. But all that time I had been able only to remain what I was—an extraordinarily intelligent man of the twentieth century. And the rest of the race had been progressing! It had been swiftly gathering knowledge and power and ability all that time, faster and faster, while I had been only remaining still. And now here was Zarentzov and the teachers of the Universities, and, probably, a hundred intelligent men, who had all outstripped me! I was being left behind.

And that is what happened. I need not dilate further upon it. By the end of that century I had been left behind by all the students of the world, and I never did understand Zarentzov. Other men came with other theories, and these theories were accepted by the world. But I could not understand them. My intellectual life was at an end. I had nothing more to understand. I knew everything I was capable of knowing, and, thenceforth, I could only play wearily with the old ideas.

Many things happened in the world. A time came when the East and West, two mighty unified hemispheres, rose up in arms: the civil war of a planet. I recall only chaotic visions of fire and thunder and hell. It was all incomprehensible to me: like a bizarre dream, things happened, people rushed about, but I never knew what they were doing. I lurked during all that time in a tiny shuddering hole under the city of Yokohama, and by a miracle I survived. And the East won. But it seems to have mattered little who did win, for all the world had become, in all except its few remaining prejudices, a single race, and nothing was changed when it was all rebuilt again, under a single government.

I saw the first of the strange creatures who appeared among us in the year 6371, men who were later known to be from the planet Venus. But they were repulsed, for they were savages compared with the Earthmen, although they were about equal to the people of my own century, 1900. Those of them who did not perish of the cold after the intense warmth of their world, and those who were not killed by our hands, those few returned silently home again. And I have always

regretted that I had not the courage to go with them.

I watched a time when the world reached perfection in mechanics, when men could accomplish anything with a touch of the finger. Strange men, these creatures of the hundredth century, men with huge brains and tiny shriveled bodies, atrophied limbs, and slow, ponderous movements on their little conveyances. It was I, with my ancient compunctions, who shuddered when at last they put to death all the perverts, the criminals, and the insane, ridding the world of the scum for which they had no more need. It was then that I was forced to produce my tattered old papers, proving my identity and my story. They knew it was true, in some strange fashion of theirs, and, thereafter, I was kept on exhibition as an archaic survival.

I saw the world made immortal through the new invention of a man called Kathol, who used somewhat the same method "legend" decreed had been used upon me. I observed the end of speech, of all perceptions except one, when men learned to communicate directly by thought, and to receive directly into the brain all the myriad vibrations of the universe.

All these things I saw, and more, until that time when there was no more discovery, but a Perfect World in which there was no need for anything but memory. Men ceased to count time at last. Several hundred years after the 154th Dynasty from the Last War, or, as we would have counted in my time, about 200,000 A.D., official records of time were no longer kept carefully. They fell into disuse. Men began to forget years, to forget time at all. Of what significance was time when one was immortal?

After long, long uncounted centuries, a time came when the days grew noticeably colder. Slowly the winters became longer, and the summers diminished to but a month or two. Fierce storms raged endlessly in winter, and in summer sometimes there was severe frost, sometimes there was only frost. In the high places and in the north and the sub-equatorial south, the snow came and would not go.

Men died by the thousands in the higher latitudes. New York became, after awhile, the furthest habitable city north, an arctic city, where warmth seldom penetrated. And great fields of ice began to make their way southward, grinding before them the brittle remains of civilizations, covering over relentlessly all of man's proud work.

Snow appeared in Florida and Italy one summer. In the end, snow was there always. Men left New York, Chicago, Paris, Yokohama, and everywhere they traveled by the millions southward, perishing as they went, pursued by the snow and the cold, and that inevitable field of ice. They were feeble creatures when the Cold first came upon them, but I speak in terms of thousands of years; and they turned every weapon of science to the recovery of their physical power, for they

foresaw that the only chance for survival lay in a hard, strong body. As for me, at last I had found a use for my few powers, for my physique was the finest in that world. It was but little comfort, however, for we were all united in our awful fear of that Cold and that grinding field of Ice. All the great cities were deserted. We would catch silent, fearful glimpses of them as we sped on in our machines over the snow—great hungry, haggard skeletons of cities, shrouded in banks of snow, snow that the wind rustled through desolate streets where the cream of human life once had passed in calm security. Yet still the Ice pursued. For men had forgotten about that Last Ice Age when they ceased to reckon time, when they lost sight of the future and steeped themselves in memories. They had not remembered that a time must come when Ice would lie white and smooth over all the earth, when the sun would shine bleakly between unending intervals of dim, twilight snow and sleet.

Slowly the Ice pursued us down the earth, until all the feeble remains of civilization were gathered in Egypt and India and South America. The deserts flowered again, but the frost would come always to bite the tiny crops. For still the Ice came. All the world now, but for a narrow strip about the equator, was one great silent desolate vista of stark ice-plains, ice that brooded above the hidden ruins of cities that had endured for hundreds of thousands of years. It was terrible to imagine the awful solitude and the endless twilight that lay on these places, and the grim snow, sailing in silence over all....

It surrounded us on all sides, until life remained only in a few scattered clearings all about that equator of the globe, with an eternal fire going to hold away the hungry Ice. Perpetual winter reigned now; and we were becoming terror-stricken beasts that preyed on each other for a life already doomed. Ah, but I, I the archaic survival, I had my revenge then, with my great physique and strong jaws—God! Let me think of something else. Those men who lived upon each other—it was horrible. And I was one.

So inevitably the Ice closed in.... One day the men of our tiny clearing were but a score. We huddled about our dying fire of bones and stray logs. We said nothing. We just sat, in deep, wordless, thoughtless silence. We were the last outpost of Mankind.

I think suddenly something very noble must have transformed these creatures to a semblance of what they had been of old. I saw, in their eyes, the question they sent from one to another, and in every eye I saw that the answer was, Yes. With one accord they rose before my eyes and, ignoring me as a baser creature, they stripped away their load of tattered rags and, one by one, they stalked with their tiny shrivelled limbs into the shivering gale of swirling, gusting snow, and disappeared. And I was alone....

So am I alone now. I have written this last fantastic history of myself and of

Mankind upon a substance that will, I know, outlast even the snow and the Ice—as it has outlasted Mankind that made it. It is the only thing with which I have never parted. For is it not irony that I should be the historian of this race—I, a savage, an "archaic survival?" Why do I write? God knows, but some instinct prompts me, although there will never be men to read.

I have been sitting here, waiting, and I have thought often of Sir John and Alice, whom I loved. Can it be that I am feeling again, after all these ages, some tiny portion of that emotion, that great passion I once knew? I see her face before me, the face I have lost from my thoughts for eons, and something is in it that stirs my blood again. Her eyes are half-closed and deep, her lips are parted as though I could crush them with an infinity of wonder and discovery. O God! It is love again, love that I thought was lost! They have often smiled upon me when I spoke of God, and muttered about my foolish, primitive superstitions. But they are gone, and I am left who believe in God, and surely there is purpose in it.

I am cold, I have written. Ah, I am frozen. My breath freezes as it mingles with the air, and I can hardly move my numbed fingers. The Ice is closing over me, and I cannot break it any longer. The storm cries weirdly all about me in the twilight, and I know this is the end. The end of the world. And I—I, the last man....

The last man....

... I am cold—cold....

But is it you, Alice? Is it you?

THE DAY TIME STOPPED MOVING

All Dave Miller wanted to do was commit suicide in peace. He tried, but the things that happened after he'd pulled the trigger were all wrong. Like everyone standing around like statues. No St. Peter, no pearly gate, no pitchforks or halos. He might just as well have saved the bullet!

Dave Miller would never have done it, had he been in his right mind. The Millers were not a melancholy stock, hardly the sort of people you expect to read about in the morning paper who have taken their lives the night before. But Dave Miller was drunk—abominably, roaringly so—and the barrel of the big revolver, as he stood against the sink, made a ring of coldness against his right temple.

Dawn was beginning to stain the frosty kitchen windows. In the faint light, the letter lay a gray square against the drain-board tiles. With the melodramatic gesture of the very drunk, Miller had scrawled across the envelope:

"This is why I did it!"

He had found Helen's letter in the envelope when he staggered into their bedroom fifteen minutes ago—at a quarter after five. As had frequently happened during the past year, he'd come home from the store a little late ... about twelve hours late, in fact. And this time Helen had done what she had long threatened to do. She had left him.

The letter was brief, containing a world of heartbreak and broken hopes.

"I don't mind having to scrimp, Dave. No woman minds that if she feels she is really helping her husband over a rough spot. When business went bad a year ago, I told you I was ready to help in any way I could. But you haven't let me. You quit fighting when things got difficult, and put in all your money and energy on liquor and horses and cards. I could stand being married to a drunkard, Dave, but not to a coward ..."

So she was trying to show him. But Miller told himself he'd show her instead. Coward, eh? Maybe this would teach her a lesson! Hell of a lot of help she'd

been! Nag at him every time he took a drink. Holler bloody murder when he put twenty-five bucks on a horse, with a chance to make five hundred. What man wouldn't do those things?

His drug store was on the skids. Could he be blamed for drinking a little too much, if alcohol dissolved the morbid vapors of his mind?

Miller stiffened angrily, and tightened his finger on the trigger. But he had one moment of frank insight just before the hammer dropped and brought the world tumbling about his ears. It brought with it a realization that the whole thing was his fault. Helen was right—he was a coward. There was a poignant ache in his heart. She'd been as loyal as they came, he knew that.

He could have spent his nights thinking up new business tricks, instead of swilling whiskey. Could have gone out of his way to be pleasant to customers, not snap at them when he had a terrific hangover. And even Miller knew nobody ever made any money on the horses—at least, not when he needed it. But horses and whiskey and business had become tragically confused in his mind; so here he was, full of liquor and madness, with a gun to his head.

Then again anger swept his mind clean of reason, and he threw his chin up and gripped the gun tight.

"Run out on me, will she!" he muttered thickly. "Well—this'll show her!"

In the next moment the hammer fell ... and Dave Miller had "shown her."

Miller opened his eyes with a start. As plain as black on white, he'd heard a bell ring—the most familiar sound in the world, too. It was the unmistakable tinkle of his cash register.

"Now, how in hell—" The thought began in his mind; and then he saw where he was.

The cash register was right in front of him! It was open, and on the marble slab lay a customer's five-spot. Miller's glance strayed up and around him.

He was behind the drug counter, all right. There were a man and a girl sipping cokes at the fountain, to his right; the magazine racks by the open door; the tobacco counter across from the fountain. And right before him was a customer.

Good Lord! he thought. Was all this a—a dream?

Sweat oozed out on his clammy forehead. That stuff of Herman's that he had drunk during the game—it had had a rank taste, but he wouldn't have thought anything short of marihuana could produce such hallucinations as he had just had. Wild conjectures came boiling up from the bottom of Miller's being.

How did he get behind the counter? Who was the woman he was waiting on? What—

The woman's curious stare was what jarred him completely into the present. Get rid of her! was his one thought. Then sit down behind the scenes and try to

figure it all out.

His hand poised over the cash drawer. Then he remembered he didn't know how much he was to take out of the five. Avoiding the woman's glance, he muttered:

"Let's see, now, that was—uh—how much did I say?"

The woman made no answer. Miller cleared his throat, said uncertainly:

"I beg your pardon, ma'am—did I say—seventy-five cents?"

It was just a feeler, but the woman didn't even answer to that. And it was right then that Dave Miller noticed the deep silence that brooded in the store.

Slowly his head came up and he looked straight into the woman's eyes. She returned him a cool, half-smiling glance. But her eyes neither blinked nor moved. Her features were frozen. Lips parted, teeth showing a little, the tip of her tongue was between her even white teeth as though she had started to say "this" and stopped with the syllable unspoken.

Muscles began to rise behind Miller's ears. He could feel his hair stiffen like filings drawn to a magnet. His glance struggled to the soda fountain. What he saw there shook him to the core of his being.

The girl who was drinking a coke had the glass to her lips, but apparently she wasn't sipping the liquid. Her boy friend's glass was on the counter. He had drawn on a cigarette and exhaled the gray smoke. That smoke hung in the air like a large, elongated balloon with the small end disappearing between his lips. While Miller stared, the smoke did not stir in the slightest.

There was something unholy, something supernatural, about this scene!

With apprehension rippling down his spine, Dave Miller reached across the cash register and touched the woman on the cheek. The flesh was warm, but as hard as flint. Tentatively, the young druggist pushed harder; finally, shoved with all his might. For all the result, the woman might have been a two-ton bronze statue. She neither budged nor changed expression.

Panic seized Miller. His voice hit a high hysterical tenor as he called to his soda-jerker.

"Pete! Pete!" he shouted. "What in God's name is wrong here!"

The blond youngster, with a towel wadded in a glass, did not stir. Miller rushed from the back of the store, seized the boy by the shoulders, tried to shake him. But Pete was rooted to the spot.

Miller knew, now, that what was wrong was something greater than a hallucination or a hangover. He was in some kind of trap. His first thought was to rush home and see if Helen was there. There was a great sense of relief when he thought of her. Helen, with her grave blue eyes and understanding manner, would listen to him and know what was the matter.

* * * * *

He left the haunted drug store at a run, darted around the corner and up the street to his car. But, though he had not locked the car, the door resisted his twisting grasp. Shaking, pounding, swearing, Miller wrestled with each of the doors.

Abruptly he stiffened, as a horrible thought leaped into his being. His gaze left the car and wandered up the street. Past the intersection, past the one beyond that, on up the thoroughfare until the gray haze of the city dimmed everything. And as far as Dave Miller could see, there was no trace of motion.

Cars were poised in the street, some passing other machines, some turning corners. A street car stood at a safety zone; a man who had leaped from the bottom step hung in space a foot above the pavement. Pedestrians paused with one foot up. A bird hovered above a telephone pole, its wings glued to the blue vault of the sky.

With a choked sound, Miller began to run. He did not slacken his pace for fifteen minutes, until around him were the familiar, reassuring trees and shrub-bordered houses of his own street. But yet how strange to him!

The season was autumn, and the air filled with brown and golden leaves that tossed on a frozen wind. Miller ran by two boys lying on a lawn, petrified into a modern counterpart of the sculptor's "The Wrestlers." The sweetish tang of burning leaves brought a thrill of terror to him; for, looking down an alley from whence the smoke drifted, he saw a man tending a fire whose leaping flames were red tongues that did not move.

Sobbing with relief, the young druggist darted up his own walk. He tried the front door, found it locked, and jammed a thumb against the doorbell. But of course the little metal button was as immovable as a mountain. So in the end, after convincing himself that the key could not be inserted into the lock, he sprang toward the back.

The screen door was not latched, but it might as well have been the steel door of a bank vault. Miller began to pound on it, shouting:

"Helen! Helen, are you in there? My God, dear, there's something wrong! You've got to—"

The silence that flowed in again when his voice choked off was the dead stillness of the tomb. He could hear his voice rustling through the empty rooms, and at last it came back to him like a taunt: " Helen! Helen!"

For Dave Miller, the world was now a planet of death on which he alone lived and moved and spoke. Staggered, utterly beaten, he made no attempt to break into his home. But he did stumble around to the kitchen window and try to peer in, anxious to see if there was a body on the floor. The room was in semi-darkness, however, and his straining eyes made out nothing.

He returned to the front of the house, shambling like a somnambulist. Seated

on the porch steps, head in hands, he slipped into a hell of regrets. He knew now that his suicide had been no hallucination. He was dead, all right; and this must be hell or purgatory.

Bitterly he cursed his drinking, that had led him to such a mad thing as suicide. Suicide! He—Dave Miller—a coward who had taken his own life! Miller's whole being crawled with revulsion. If he just had the last year to live over again, he thought fervently.

And yet, through it all, some inner strain kept trying to tell him he was not dead. This was his own world, all right, and essentially unchanged. What had happened to it was beyond the pale of mere guesswork. But this one thing began to be clear: This was a world in which change or motion of any kind was a foreigner.

Fire would not burn and smoke did not rise. Doors would not open, liquids were solid. Miller's stubbing toe could not move a pebble, and a blade of grass easily supported his weight without bending. In other words, Miller began to understand, change had been stopped as surely as if a master hand had put a finger on the world's balance wheel.

Miller's ramblings were terminated by the consciousness that he had an acute headache. His mouth tasted, as Herman used to say after a big night, as if an army had camped in it. Coffee and a bromo were what he needed.

But it was a great awakening to him when he found a restaurant and learned that he could neither drink the coffee nor get the lid off the bromo bottle. Fragrant coffee-steam hung over the glass percolator, but even this steam was as a brick wall to his probing touch. Miller started gloomily to thread his way through the waiters in back of the counter again.

Moments later he stood in the street and there were tears swimming in his eyes.

"Helen!" His voice was a pleading whisper. "Helen, honey, where are you?"

There was no answer but the pitiful palpitation of utter silence. And then, there was movement at Dave Miller's right!

Something shot from between the parked cars and crashed against him; something brown and hairy and soft. It knocked him down. Before he could get his breath, a red, wet tongue was licking his face and hands, and he was looking up into the face of a police dog!

Frantic with joy at seeing another in this city of death, the dog would scarcely let Miller rise. It stood up to plant big paws on his shoulders and try to lick his face. Miller laughed out loud, a laugh with a throaty catch in it.

"Where'd you come from, boy?" he asked. "Won't they talk to you, either? What's your name, boy?"

There was a heavy, brass-studded collar about the animal's neck, and Dave

Miller read on its little nameplate: "Major."

"Well, Major, at least we've got company now," was Miller's sigh of relief.

For a long time he was too busy with the dog to bother about the sobbing noises. Apparently the dog failed to hear them, for he gave no sign. Miller scratched him behind the ear.

"What shall we do now, Major? Walk? Maybe your nose can smell out another friend for us."

They had gone hardly two blocks when it came to him that there was a more useful way of spending their time. The library! Half convinced that the whole trouble stemmed from his suicide shot in the head—which was conspicuously absent now—he decided that a perusal of the surgery books in the public library might yield something he could use.

That way they bent their steps, and were soon mounting the broad cement stairs of the building. As they went beneath the brass turnstile, the librarian caught Miller's attention with a smiling glance. He smiled back.

"I'm trying to find something on brain surgery," he explained. "I—"

With a shock, then, he realized he had been talking to himself.

In the next instant, Dave Miller whirled. A voice from the bookcases chuckled:

"If you find anything, I wish you'd let me know. I'm stumped myself!"

From a corner of the room came an elderly, half-bald man with tangled gray brows and a rueful smile. A pencil was balanced over his ear, and a note-book was clutched in his hand.

"You, too!" he said. "I had hoped I was the only one—"

Miller went forward hurriedly to grip his hand.

"I'm afraid I'm not so unselfish," he admitted. "I've been hoping for two hours that I'd run into some other poor soul."

"Quite understandable," the stranger murmured sympathetically. "But in my case it is different. You see—I am responsible for this whole tragic business!"

"You!" Dave Miller gulped the word. "I—I thought—"

The man wagged his head, staring at his note pad, which was littered with jumbled calculations. Miller had a chance to study him. He was tall, heavily built, with wide, sturdy shoulders despite his sixty years. Oddly, he wore a gray-green smock. His eyes, narrowed and intent, looked gimlet-sharp beneath those toothbrush brows of his, as he stared at the pad.

"There's the trouble, right there," he muttered. "I provided only three stages of amplification, whereas four would have been barely enough. No wonder the phase didn't carry through!"

"I guess I don't follow you," Miller faltered. "You mean—something you

did—"

"I should think it was something I did!" The baldish stranger scratched his head with the tip of his pencil. "I'm John Erickson—you know, the Wanamaker Institute."

Miller said: "Oh!" in an understanding voice. Erickson was head of Wanamaker Institute, first laboratory of them all when it came to exploding atoms and blazing trails into the wildernesses of science.

Erickson's piercing eyes were suddenly boring into the younger man.

"You've been sick, haven't you?" he demanded.

"Well—no—not really sick." The druggist colored. "I'll have to admit to being drunk a few hours ago, though."

"Drunk—" Erickson stuck his tongue in his cheek, shook his head, scowled. "No, that would hardly do it. There must have been something else. The impulsor isn't that powerful. I can understand about the dog, poor fellow. He must have been run over, and I caught him just at the instant of passing from life to death."

"Oh!" Dave Miller lifted his head, knowing now what Erickson was driving at. "Well, I may as well be frank. I'm—I committed suicide. That's how drunk I was. There hasn't been a suicide in the Miller family in centuries. It took a skinful of liquor to set the precedent."

Erickson nodded wisely. "Perhaps we will find the precedent hasn't really been set! But no matter—" His lifted hand stopped Miller's eager, wondering exclamation. "The point is, young man, we three are in a tough spot, and it's up to us to get out of it. And not only we, but heaven knows how many others the world over!"

"Would you—maybe you can explain to my lay mind what's happened," Miller suggested.

"Of course. Forgive me. You see, Mr.—"

"Miller. Dave Miller."

"Dave it is. I have a feeling we're going to be pretty well acquainted before this is over. You see, Dave, I'm a nut on so-called 'time theories.' I've seen time compared to everything from an entity to a long, pink worm. But I disagree with them all, because they postulate the idea that time is constantly being manufactured. Such reasoning is fantastic!

"Time exists. Not as an ever-growing chain of links, because such a chain would have to have a tail end, if it has a front end; and who can imagine the period when time did not exist? So I think time is like a circular train-track. Unending. We who live and die merely travel around on it. The future exists simultaneously with the past, for one instant when they meet."

Miller's brain was humming. Erickson shot the words at him staccato-fash-

ion, as if they were things known from Great Primer days. The young druggist scratched his head.

"You've got me licked," he admitted. "I'm a stranger here, myself."

"Naturally you can't be expected to understand things I've been all my life puzzling about. Simplest way I can explain it is that we are on a train following this immense circular railway.

"When the train reaches the point where it started, it is about to plunge into the past; but this is impossible, because the point where it started is simply the caboose of the train! And that point is always ahead—and behind—the time-train.

"Now, my idea was that with the proper stimulus a man could be thrust across the diameter of this circular railway to a point in his past. Because of the nature of time, he could neither go ahead of the train to meet the future nor could he stand still and let the caboose catch up with him. But—he could detour across the circle and land farther back on the train! And that, my dear Dave, is what you and I and Major have done—almost."

"Almost?" Miller said hoarsely.

Erickson pursed his lips. "We are somewhere partway across the space between present and past. We are living in an instant that can move neither forward nor back. You and I, Dave, and Major—and the Lord knows how many others the world over—have been thrust by my time impulsor onto a timeless beach of eternity. We have been caught in time's backwash. Castaways, you might say."

An objection clamored for attention in Miller's mind.

"But if this is so, where are the rest of them? Where is my wife?"

"They are right here," Erickson explained. "No doubt you could see your wife if you could find her. But we see them as statues, because, for us, time no longer exists. But there was something I did not count on. I did not know that it would be possible to live in one small instant of time, as we are doing. And I did not know that only those who are hovering between life and death can deviate from the normal process of time!"

"You mean—we're dead!" Miller's voice was a bitter monotone.

"Obviously not. We're talking and moving, aren't we? But—we are on the fence. When I gave my impulsor the jolt of high power, it went wrong and I think something must have happened to me. At the same instant, you had shot yourself.

"Perhaps, Dave, you are dying. The only way for us to find out is to try to get the machine working and topple ourselves one way or the other. If we fall back, we will all live. If we fall into the present—we may die."

"Either way, it's better than this!" Miller said fervently.

"I came to the library here, hoping to find out the things I must know. My own books are locked in my study. And these—they might be cemented in their

places, for all their use to me. I suppose we might as well go back to the lab.''

Miller nodded, murmuring: ''Maybe you'll get an idea when you look at the machine again.''

''Let's hope so,'' said Erickson grimly. ''God knows I've failed so far!''

It was a solid hour's walk out to West Wilshire, where the laboratory was. The immense bronze and glass doors of Wanamaker Institute were closed, and so barred to the two men. But Erickson led the way down the side.

''We can get in a service door. Then we climb through transoms and ventilators until we get to my lab.''

Major frisked along beside them. He was enjoying the action and the companionship. It was less of an adventure to Miller, who knew death might be ahead for the three of them.

Two workmen were moving a heavy cabinet in the side service door. To get in, they climbed up the back of the rear workman, walked across the cabinet, and scaled down the front of the leading man. They went up the stairs to the fifteenth floor. Here they crawled through a transom into the wing marked:

''Experimental. Enter Only By Appointment.''

Major was helped through it, then they were crawling along the dark metal tunnel of an air-conditioning ventilator. It was small, and took some wriggling.

In the next room, they were confronted by a stern receptionist on whose desk was a little brass sign, reading:

''Have you an appointment?''

Miller had had his share of experience with receptionists' ways, in his days as a pharmaceutical salesman. He took the greatest pleasure now in lighting his cigarette from a match struck on the girl's nose. Then he blew the smoke in her face and hastened to crawl through the final transom.

John Erickson's laboratory was well lighted by a glass-brick wall and a huge skylight. The sun's rays glinted on the time impulsor.[1] The scientist explained the impulsor in concise terms. When he had finished, Dave Miller knew just as little as before, and the outfit still resembled three transformers in a line, of the type seen on power-poles, connected to a great bronze globe hanging from the ceiling.

''There's the monster that put us in this plight,'' Erickson grunted. ''Too strong to be legal, too weak to do the job right. Take a good look!''

With his hands jammed in his pockets, he frowned at the complex machinery. Miller stared a few moments; then transferred his interests to other things in the room. He was immediately struck by the resemblance of a transformer in a far corner to the ones linked up with the impulsor.

''What's that?'' he asked quickly. ''Looks the same as the ones you used over

there.''

''It is.''

''But—Didn't you say all you needed was another stage of power?''

''That's right.''

''Maybe I'm crazy!'' Miller stared from impulsor to transformer and back again. ''Why don't you use it, then?''

''Using what for the connection?'' Erickson's eyes gently mocked him.

''Wire, of course!''

The scientist jerked a thumb at a small bale of heavy copper wire.

''Bring it over and we'll try it.''

Miller was halfway to it when he brought up short. Then a sheepish grin spread over his features.

''I get it,'' he chuckled. ''That bale of wire might be the Empire State Building, as far as we're concerned. Forgive my stupidity.''

Erickson suddenly became serious.

''I'd like to be optimistic, Dave,'' he muttered, ''but in all fairness to you I must tell you I see no way out of this. The machine is, of course, still working, and with that extra stage of power, the uncertainty would be over. But where, in this world of immovable things, will we find a piece of wire twenty-five feet long?''

There was a warm, moist sensation against Miller's hand, and when he looked down Major stared up at him commiseratingly. Miller scratched him behind the ear, and the dog closed his eyes, reassured and happy. The young druggist sighed, wishing there were some giant hand to scratch him behind the ear and smooth his troubles over.

''And if we don't get out,'' he said soberly, ''we'll starve, I suppose.''

''No, I don't think it will be that quick. I haven't felt any hunger. I don't expect to. After all, our bodies are still living in one instant of time, and a man can't work up a healthy appetite in one second. Of course, this elastic-second business precludes the possibility of disease.

''Our bodies must go on unchanged. The only hope I see is—when we are on the verge of madness, suicide. That means jumping off a bridge, I suppose. Poison, guns, knives—all the usual wherewithal—are denied to us.''

Black despair closed down on Dave Miller. He thrust it back, forcing a crooked grin.

''Let's make a bargain,'' he offered. ''When we finish fooling around with this apparatus, we split up. We'll only be at each other's throat if we stick together. I'll be blaming you for my plight, and I don't want to. It's my fault as much as yours. How about it?''

John Erickson gripped his hand. "You're all right, Dave. Let me give you some advice. If ever you do get back to the present ... keep away from liquor. Liquor and the Irish never did mix. You'll have that store on its feet again in no time."

"Thanks!" Miller said fervently. "And I think I can promise that nothing less than a whiskey antidote for snake bite will ever make me bend an elbow again!"

For the next couple of hours, despondency reigned in the laboratory. But it was soon to be deposed again by hope.

Despite all of Erickson's scientific training, it was Dave Miller himself who grasped the down-to-earth idea that started them hoping again. He was walking about the lab, jingling keys in his pocket, when suddenly he stopped short. He jerked the ring of keys into his hand.

"Erickson!" he gasped. "We've been blind. Look at this!"

The scientist looked; but he remained puzzled.

"Well—?" he asked skeptically.

"There's our wire!" Dave Miller exclaimed. "You've got keys; I've got keys. We've got coins, knives, wristwatches. Why can't we lay them all end to end—"

Erickson's features looked as if he had been electrically shocked.

"You've hit it!" he cried. "If we've got enough!"

With one accord, they began emptying their pockets, tearing off wrist-watches, searching for pencils. The finds made a little heap in the middle of the floor. Erickson let his long fingers claw through thinning hair.

"God give us enough! We'll only need the one wire. The thing is plugged in already and only the positive pole has to be connected to the globe. Come on!"

Scooping up the assortment of metal articles, they rushed across the room. With his pocket-knife, Dave Miller began breaking up the metal wrist-watch straps, opening the links out so that they could be laid end-to-end for the greatest possible length. They patiently broke the watches to pieces, and of the junk they garnered made a ragged foot and a half of "wire." Their coins stretched the line still further.

They had ten feet covered before the stuff was half used up. Their metal pencils, taken apart, gave them a good two feet. Key chains helped generously. With eighteen feet covered, their progress began to slow down.

Perspiration poured down Miller's face. Desperately, he tore off his lodge ring and cut it in two to pound it flat. From garters and suspenders they won a few inches more. And then—they stopped—feet from their goal.

Miller groaned. He tossed his pocket-knife in his hand.

"We can get a foot out of this," he estimated. "But that still leaves us way short."

Abruptly, Erickson snapped his fingers.

"Shoes!" he gasped. "They're full of nails. Get to work with that knife, Dave. We'll cut out every one of 'em!"

In ten minutes, the shoes were reduced to ragged piles of tattered leather. Erickson's deft fingers painstakingly placed the nails, one by one, in the line. The distance left to cover was less than six inches!

He lined up the last few nails. Then both men were sinking back on their heels, as they saw there was a gap of three inches to cover!

"Beaten!" Erickson ground out. "By three inches! Three inches from the present ... and yet it might as well be a million miles!"

Miller's body felt as though it were in a vise. His muscles ached with strain. So taut were his nerves that he leaped as though stung when Major nuzzled a cool nose into his hand again. Automatically, he began to stroke the dog's neck.

"Well, that licks us," he muttered. "There isn't another piece of movable metal in the world."

Major kept whimpering and pushing against him. Annoyed, the druggist shoved him away.

"Go 'way," he muttered. "I don't feel like—"

Suddenly then his eyes widened, as his touch encountered warm metal. He whirled.

"There it is!" he yelled. "The last link. The nameplate on Major's collar!"

In a flash, he had torn the little rectangular brass plate from the dog collar. Erickson took it from his grasp. Sweat stood shiny on his skin. He held the bit of metal over the gap between wire and pole.

"This is it!" he smiled brittlely. "We're on our way, Dave. Where, I don't know. To death, or back to life. But—we're going!"

The metal clinked into place. Live, writhing power leaped through the wire, snarling across partial breaks. The transformers began to hum. The humming grew louder. Singing softly, the bronze globe over their heads glowed green. Dave Miller felt a curious lightness. There was a snap in his brain, and Erickson, Major and the laboratory faded from his senses.

Then came an interval when the only sound was the soft sobbing he had been hearing as if in a dream. That, and blackness that enfolded him like soft velvet. Then Miller was opening his eyes, to see the familiar walls of his own kitchen around him!

Someone cried out.

"Dave! Oh, Dave, dear!"

It was Helen's voice, and it was Helen who cradled his head in her lap and bent her face close to his.

"Oh, thank God that you're alive—!"

"Helen!" Miller murmured. "What—are—you—doing here?"

"I couldn't go through with it. I—I just couldn't leave you. I came back and—and I heard the shot and ran in. The doctor should be here. I called him five minutes ago."

"Five minutes ... How long has it been since I shot myself?"

"Oh, just six or seven minutes. I called the doctor right away."

Miller took a deep breath. Then it must have been a dream. All that—to happen in a few minutes—It wasn't possible!

"How—how could I have botched the job?" he muttered. "I wasn't drunk enough to miss myself completely."

Helen looked at the huge revolver lying in the sink.

"Oh, that old forty-five of Grandfather's! It hasn't been loaded since the Civil War. I guess the powder got damp or something. It just sort of sputtered instead of exploding properly. Dave, promise me something! You won't ever do anything like this again, if I promise not to nag you?"

Dave Miller closed his eyes. "There won't be any need to nag, Helen. Some people take a lot of teaching, but I've had my lesson. I've got ideas about the store which I'd been too lazy to try out. You know, I feel more like fighting right now than I have for years! We'll lick 'em, won't we, honey?"

Helen buried her face in the hollow of his shoulder and cried softly. Her words were too muffled to be intelligible. But Dave Miller understood what she meant.

He had thought the whole thing a dream—John Erickson, the "time impulsor" and Major. But that night he read an item in the Evening Courier that was to keep him thinking for many days.

POLICE INVESTIGATE DEATH OF SCIENTIST HERE IN LABORATORY

John M. Erickson, director of the Wanamaker Institute, died at his work last night. Erickson was a beloved and valuable figure in the world of science, famous for his recently publicized "time lapse" theory.

Two strange circumstances surrounded his death. One was the presence of a German shepherd dog in the laboratory, its head crushed as if with a sledgehammer. The other was a chain of small metal objects stretching from one corner of the room to the other, as if intended to take the place of wire in a circuit.

Police, however, discount this idea, as there was a roll of wire only a few feet from the body.

THE END

FOOTNOTES:

[1] Obviously this electric time impulsor is a machine in the nature of an

atomic integrator. It "broadcasts" great waves of electrons which align all atomic objects in rigid suspension.

That is to say, atomic structures are literally "frozen." Living bodies are similarly affected. It is a widely held belief on the part of many eminent scientists that all matter, broken down into its elementary atomic composition, is electrical in structure.

That being so, there is no reason to suppose why Professor Erickson may not have discovered a time impulsor which, broadcasting electronic impulses, "froze" everything within its range.—ED.